INTRODUCTION

This handbook has been compiled by Track of the Tiger T.R.D. Co., Ltd, who have been operating in Thailand for more than 20 years.

Track of the Tiger is well recognized as a soft adventure tour specialist that offers a range of culturally sensitive excursions and multi-day programmes to both the tour industry, and to those buying direct online. The product mix includes programmes in the mountains of the north, on the islands of the south, with interesting options for individuals, groups and families. We also cater towards large corporate groups for pre or post MICE-event tours.

Our philosophy has long been ‘to focus on the triple bottom line’ – delivering not only financial returns to the shareholders, but placing great emphasis on the cost vs benefits of our operating practices - to the environment, and to the community of which we are a part.

Much of the information contained herein has been drawn from the excellent guidebook on northern Thailand called Touring Northern Thailand, by John R. Davies (published by Footloose books). We also highly recommend Oliver Hargreave’s Exploring Chiang Mai: City, Valley & Mountains. Those seeking further, more detailed, information should find these books extremely helpful.

Track of the Tiger is also please to assist with enquiries about the region. Also, keep an eye on our publishing operation, for we will soon be launching “1001 things to see and do in Chiang Mai”, which will provide tremendous detail on the region.
Contact us via the details below for more information on any of our services.

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ROYALTY

Thais hold their royal family in great reverence. Few visitors from the West can comprehend the relationship between the Thai people and their revered and beloved King.

In reading the following tribute, Long Live His Majesty, visitors may glean a better understanding as to just why the King is held in such reverence.

It would be considered extremely offensive were foreigners not to show respect for royal images, the national anthem, and the Thai flag as Thais do. On the other hand, displaying respect usually elicits smiles of appreciation from the locals, as they are very proud to be Thai.

A common albeit unintentional mistake made by visitors is in passing over or receiving currency. They tend to handle coins and notes carelessly, not mindful of the fact that the currency bears the King’s image. Never throw money down, step on it, or deface a banknote or coin.

LONG LIVE HIS MAJESTY

The following text is an ‘edited version’ of a tribute to the King in his 50th year of reign. It was written by Khun Anand Panyarachun, twice a prime minister of Thailand and a widely respected statesman.

The following address is based on the personal perceptions of an individual who spent 23 years in his country’s foreign service, 13 years in the private sector and served twice, albeit for short and limited duration, as prime minister. Hence, I might be deemed somewhat qualified, in an unscholarly manner, to speak of our King, the longest reigning monarch in the world, and his 50 years’ reign.

I am sure that all of you here are aware of this historic event in our country. The entire nation joins hands in the national celebrations of His Majesty’s Golden Jubilee this year (1996). The outpouring of joy, gratification and pride sees no parallel in the more than 700 years history of our nation.

It has indeed been a remarkable reign of a Thai king who succeeded to the throne after the abdication of his uncle, King Prajadhipok, Rama VII, in 1935, and the untimely demise of his elder brother, King Anada Mahidol, Rama VIII, in 1946.
It could well be said that His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej became King Rama IX by accident. He was not born to be King. As such, he had little time to be groomed to be one. When he as a young man of 19 years of age ascended to the throne in 1946, it was only 14 years after absolute monarchy, which existed for nearly 700 years, and had been brought to an end in a relatively peaceful way. The political process was then still fragile and turbulent. The military wing of the “democratic” movement was gaining dominance and losing sight of its initial democratic spirit and goals.

His Majesty began learning his constitutional craft in 1946 at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, where he changed his specialization from science to law and political science. This academic study was merely a primer - at best a theoretical course.

To understand the present-day Thai monarchy, one needs to go back to the founding of the first central Thai state, Sukhothai, in the 13th century. The pioneers of independence chose to elevate the wisest and most capable amongst them to be king. The King, having been entrusted with the task not out of any divine right but by the consent of his peers, had an inherent obligation to rule the country “with righteousness”, not for the glory of himself or his family but “for the benefits and happiness” of the people in his trust.

The king, being a Buddhist, was in effect a dharma raja - that is, a monarch upholding the rule of Buddhist righteousness, ruling in a style of kingship some have summarized as “paternalistic”, the royal code of conduct emphasized the major Buddhist precepts and the Tenfold Practice or Duties of Kingship, which to this day remain the cornerstone of Thai kingship: alms-giving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-restriction, non-anger, non-violence, forbearance and non-obstruction. During the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng the Great, the ideal of a paternalistic ruler, sensitive to the needs of his people and aware of his duty to guide them, was already well established. This system was memorably reflected in a famous historical inscription found among the ruins of Sukhothai. It describes life in the first capital and contains the following passage: “(The King) has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there; if any commoner in the land has a grievance….which he wants to make known to his lord and ruler, it is easy; he goes and strikes the bell which the King has hung there; King Ramkhamhaeng, ruler of the Kingdom, hears the call; he goes and questions the man, examines the case and decides it justly for him.”

For more than seven centuries, this concept of a paternalistic and accessible monarch has remained a Thai ideal. The change of capital from Sukhothai to Ayutthaya brought about the Khmer concept of divine kingship and the Ayuttaya Kings incorporated many of the divine features, with all attendant royal rituals and ceremonies, into the function of the Throne. The Sukhothai style of kingship,
nonetheless, has never entirely disappeared from the national consciousness and it was resurrected when the rulers of the Chakri Dynasty ushered in a new era in 1782.

Since 1782, when Bangkok was established as the capital, a succession of rulers of the Royal House of Chakri have contributed to the practice of deeply-rooted Buddhist beliefs and the benevolence of reigning as their forefathers. Both King Mongkut, Rama IV, and King Chulalongkorn, Rama V - the great grandfather and grandfather of our reigning King - travelled widely throughout the country. They strove to cultivate personal contacts and discourse with their subjects, however common or humble, and in the process, and often incognito learned of their thoughts and problems. The Chakri Kings, well-aware of the changes taking place within the kingdom and the outside world, brought about reforms and opened up the country to external influences and ideas, paving the way for Thailand to become a modern state under a constitutional monarchy.

“Continuity and Change” is now an almost cliched theme of historical study. Yet the story of the Thai monarchy demonstrated very clearly the continued general validity of such an approach. Thailand is now a constitutional monarchy and a country aspiring to become a newly developed society, but the traditional principles of righteous Buddhist kingship and kingly virtues remain of paramount importance to the present monarchy. His Majesty has displayed, and continues to display, a profound understanding of constitutional kingship as well as the traditional sources and symbols of Thai monarchical tradition.

In his oath of Ascension to the Throne, as his ancestors had done, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej pledged to “reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people”. In his 50-year reign, he has not deviated from that pledge. Indeed, he has earned the love, admiration and trust of his people in a manner that cannot be fully comprehended by foreigners.

The significance of his reign relates to three main themes: the well-being of his subjects, the security and stability of his nation, and national unity.
In the 50s and 60s, he travelled to every nook and corner of the country, meeting with the people, especially farmers and the poor in rural and remote areas as well as the hill tribes. Gathering information, personally assessing the farming and agricultural areas, experimenting with his new concepts and applying appropriate technology at his palace grounds in Bangkok, he began a series of Royally-initiated projects.

His nearly 2,000 projects to date deal with such areas as irrigation, water-resources management, forest and fishery conservation, soil erosion and improvement, crop-substitution, re-afforestation, land development, rural and community development, primary health care, eradication of leprosy, education, flood control urban traffic and environmental protection. His wide-ranging interest, combined with his self-acquired technical knowledge and pragmatic approach based on local culture and wisdom, have enabled the poor, the underprivileged and the disenfranchised to lead a more hopeful and constructive life, thereby strengthening the social fabric of our society and fortifying our national cohesion and identity.

His work in all these development areas stems from his conviction that the well-being of the people is tantamount to the well-being of their sovereign. That the two are inseparable and inter-related. His concern for the security and stability of the Thai nation is reflected in the innumerable trips and lengthy visits he, the Queen and other members of the Royal family, have made to the sensitive areas of the country which were, at one time, confronted with communist insurgency movements or separatist, ethnic and religious-inspired bands of rebels and bandits. His frequent visits were a morale booster to the populace. His royal projects to uplift the living conditions of the people in those areas underline his own personal commitment and dedication to the people. He has proven by his deeds that he has an overriding interest in his subjects.

After a state visit to a foreign country, His Majesty inspired the then government to embark on the first national economic and social development plan, laying the foundation for the country to move in a more systematic manner from an agrarian society to an agro-industrial one. He also built up close personal relations with other monarchs and chiefs of state of major powers and neighbouring countries which, on many occasions, helped to avert potential conflicts and reduce tensions along the border. His personal diplomacy, exercised judiciously and unobtrusively, has contributed to the harmonization of national and international co-operation.

I have so far dwelled on the varied activities that His Majesty initiated, developed and implemented. These activities do not normally fall within the domain of a constitutional monarch. But the fact that he has persevered in these activities for the long-lasting benefit of the Thais, in general, willingly and unreservedly accord him the confidence and trust that no other monarch in our history, or for
that matter any other monarch in the world, has ever enjoyed. The King has, in the process, gained the “reserve powers” which he has put to good use whenever circumstances require.

Now I shall deal with the King’s constitutional role and how he has discreetly and deftly influenced the course of our political history. We must bear in mind that the young King, after his accession to the Throne in 1946, had to tread cautiously through the shoals of political and military bedrock. Political intrigues and military machinations were the order of the day and His Majesty, while widely loved and respected, was still relatively a figurehead of a people who had yet to know their own sovereign.

As I stated previously, the King embarked early in his reign on a journey to know his subjects and, in the process, allowed his subjects to get close to and to know him. At the same time, he used his time wisely to accumulate “constitutional” experience. He has been through 15 constitutions, 17 coups d’état, and 21 prime ministers. He has an acute grasp of constitutional rule. He remains detached from politics, playing a non-partisan role in the country’s political process and development.

As a constitutional monarch, however, he possesses “the right to be consulted, the right to encourage and the right to warn”. Under normal circumstances, he exercised these rights through private audiences he grants to the prime minister of the day. What transpires during these meetings remains private and confidential, and even after the statutory silent period, part of the consultations may not be made known.

In a constitutional monarchy, the King does have certain powers and responsibilities under constitutional provisions. In exercising this power, he must be ever conscious of his responsibility and objectivity. All bills approved by the National Assembly are to be presented to the King for signature. This is not just a formality, as the King retains discretionary power to withhold his assent temporarily. In private consultations with the prime minister, the King’s comments, be they “encouraging” or “warning”, provide an important input for the head of government, if he wishes, to re-evaluate the government’s position and direction.
His Majesty alone possesses continuous political experience and has always kept to constitutional proprieties. His remarks, whether made privately or publicly, have always been listened to with great attention and circumspection. His indirect influence on government policies and measures cannot, therefore, be underestimated.

A constitutional monarch may dissolve Parliament, appoint a prime minister, high-ranking officers and civil servants. There have, however been a number of “extraordinary political situations” where the King has had to draw on his “reserve power” to defuse national crises.

It is public knowledge that there were two occasions when His Majesty used this reserve power. The first was the student uprising in October 1973 when demands were made for a permanent constitution and an end to government by martial law. The arrest of student leaders provoked a massive popular demonstration, which unfortunately led to the killing of a number of student activists and innocent bystanders. The situation was threatening to erupt into a destructive national confrontation. The Government had lost control. The King, sensing the suffering of the people, intervened in a dramatic television appearance. His Majesty was able to reassure the people that the crisis had subsided and that the three key military figures had decided to leave the country.

The King then took the unprecedented step of appointing one of his Privy Councillors as the next prime minister of Thailand. Normalcy was soon restored, much to the relief of the people. A new era of democracy was bought into being, but the process remained fragile and tentative. It came to an abrupt end in October 1976.

The period between 1976-1997 saw the “ups and downs” of our national efforts to develop democratic institutions, oriented toward stability. Progress was made gradually and steadily until a bloodless coup took place in February 1991. There was thereafter a period of national reconciliation and consensus building. Success eluded us and we as a nation succumbed to one more traumatic episode.

The May 1992 tragedy was a classic case of a government out of touch with the times and the sentiments of the masses. The attempt by demonstrators to topple the government gained momentum outside parliamentary confines. There again, senseless shooting precipitated the outbreak of mob mentality, resulting in a horrifying showdown.

The King, closely following the increasingly tragic developments and accurately assessing the country’s mood, summoned the two antagonistic leaders to the Palace in full view of national television. He quietly, but sternly, admonished them for the dire consequences of their actions. The whole Kingdom, and international viewers of CNN and BBC around the world, witnessed on their TV screen how a national crisis had been resolved by His Majesty’s reserve power.
His sense of timing was of decisive importance. A premature intervention might not have produced the desired result and could have exacerbated the already explosive situation. Hence, it can be said that the timing of His Majesty’s actions is determined by the gravity of the state of affairs of the country in other words, when he senses that total breakdown is impending or that the country is on the verge of a political vacuum.

The bloodshed stopped immediately thereafter. The prime minister voluntarily resigned from his post. Some two weeks later, a new civilian prime minister - a non member of the House of Representatives - was nominated on the afternoon of June 10, 1992, by the President of the Parliament and appointed by Royal Command that evening.

To what extent our arrival at this juncture has been due to His Majesty’s non-partisan guidance during his 50 years reign needs to be fully assessed and analysed by historians. As a layman, I have no doubt that his sense of justice, his overriding concern for the well-being and security of his people, his sense of history as well as his pragmatic and gradualist approach, have made a highly significant impact on the political, economic and social development of Thailand. He has the skill and integrity to influence politics without being political.

Without His Majesty’s guiding hand, we would not be where we are today - a nation which has consistently demonstrated its inner strength, political resilience, social harmony and economic dynamism - a trait which has enabled the Thais to survive many a threat and misfortune in their long history.

The course of modern Thai political history will run smoothly and peacefully if and when the Thai political system pursues the middle path and a balance is achieved between freedom and stability. His Majesty’s adoption of the balanced approach during his 50 years reign serves as an inspiration for the governance of Thailand.

To the Thai people, the monarchy is not an abstract concept, but a real, tangible, human and caring institution. His Majesty the King personifies positive elements of our national characteristics and he is the very embodiment of the common character of the Thai people of all ethnic groups, religion and culture. He is our inspiration toward a stronger, more secure and prosperous destiny. He has deservedly earned the respect and trust of his people to the point that his baramee (in the Thai language) would overcome all adversities. He is the soul of the Thai nation. Long live His Majesty.
The Thais are a deeply religious people. For the Buddhist majority it underlies all activities and is the backbone of the Thai culture - a culture that has survived intact and independent for so long largely because of the principles of the Buddhist faith.

Ninety percent of the population are Theravada Buddhists. The Theravada school of Buddhism is based more purely on the teachings of Gotama Siddartha (Buddha) without the refinements added on by later monks. Buddhist believe that existence is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, so the elimination of desire leads to a state of perfect non-suffering and non-existence called nibbana (nirvana).

It is non-individualistic philosophy which preaches that the suppression and eventual extinction of the ego are the only way to be content. Almost all Thais believe in reincarnation, hopefully to a higher form of life, leading ultimately to the achievement of nibbana. To this end they “make merit” by doing good deeds. Ways to make merit include giving money to beggars, releasing caged birds and giving food to monks who do their early morning “alms round”. Most males will do a spell (although generally only a few weeks) as novices in a temple. This brings merit to the family, and is expected of all boys once they reach the age of eighteen. Within the temple, they will be trained in Buddhist history and philosophy, the paths to enlightenment and the principles of meditation.

There are two sects of Buddhist monks in Thailand, the orange robed Mahanikai and the stricter, more academic red-brown robed Thammayut who can eat only one meal a day (before noon), provided for them by those who wish to make merit. They cannot touch money. The services of monks are requested for every occasion. New houses or cars should be blessed to bring good luck. Nine monks are required for a marriage, and three days of chanting ‘mantras’ by a group of monks is normal at a funeral.

Underlying Buddhism in Northern Thailand is animism - a belief that all things, such as trees, stones and rivers, have living souls. “Spirit houses” outside all building in Thailand are made attractive
to any possibly harmful spirit so that it will not “haunt” the humans living nearby. Buddhism has managed to mould itself onto Animism in Thailand, producing an unusual blend of moral philosophy and superstition. Some of the Chinese and Shan of Northern Thailand are Muslim. There are several mosques in a number of cities, and the town of Doi Mae Salong (Santikiree) in the far north, settled by Chinese, has a Muslim majority.

Christianity, introduced recently by missionaries, has gained many converts in the hill tribes. Up to 30% of Karen claim to be Christians, with many Lisu and Kachin people having converted as well, moreso in Burma than Thailand however. Most hill tribe people, though, are animists, with some converts to Buddhism and Christianity. Many Yao people, who originated in Southern China, are Taoist, practising a primitive form of Taoism which was known in China 600 years ago.

BUDDHISM

Note: I have chosen to include a more in-depth explanation of Buddhism than is normally written in a guidebook on Thailand. Over the years, I have found that visitors to the Kingdom are more than a little curious about Buddhism, particularly as in these changing times the doctrine and practice of the various Christian faiths appear to provide few answers to the ever-increasing and more complex problems facing modern man.

There is no such thing as a good Buddhist or a bad Buddhist, viewed in the same context as someone being considered a good or bad Christian. Buddhism is more of a personal philosophy than a group religion. An individual following the ‘middle path’, the long road to enlightenment encounters and overcomes the obstacles at his own pace. How good a Buddhist he is, or how far along the path he has travelled, is unimportant to anyone other than himself.
Where Christian religions preach that one must have ‘blind faith’ in the aspects of the doctrine that you may have trouble accepting, Buddhism teaches that you should ‘question everything’ until you find an answer that satisfies you. Buddhism not only teaches tolerance, it practices it. It does not claim that other religions are false, it encourages you to make your own judgements. There is no hard sell, and no requirement for monks to ‘save’ a quota of souls.

Consider this anecdote, my personal favourite, used in old teachings of Zen Buddhism:
Two monks were walking by a river at daybreak in the early spring. Swollen with melted snow, the river coursed about its banks, immersing the local footbridge, the only crossing for miles in either direction, under two feet of water. A young woman in a tight full length silk dress stood by the riverbank, terrified by the rushing water.

Seeing the monks, she flashed them a look of pleading. The younger monk avoided eye contact, whilst without a word, the older monk scooped her up in his arms, held her aloft as he struggled across the submerged bridge, and set her down on the far bank. The two monks then continued walking in silence until sunset, when the vows of their order allowed them to speak.

“How could you have picked up that woman?” spluttered the younger monk, his eyes blazing with anger. “You know very well we are forbidden from even thinking about a woman, let alone touching one. You sullied your honour, You are a disgrace to the whole order,” he said, shaking his fist at his companion.
“Venerable brother,” said the older monk, “I put that woman down on the other side of the river at sunrise; it is you who have been carrying her all day”......
LIFE OF THE BUDDHA

History, Fact or Fiction?

In tracing the long life of Siddartha Gotama from birth to enlightenment, and then from Buddhahood to death, one must rely on sources that conjoin fact with fable, legend with history, the myth with the man.

For primary source one turns to the Buddha’s own words as recorded in his discourses, to the word of his disciples, and to the Buddhist scriptures. Secondary sources were written several hundred years after the Buddha’s death, and often reflect the particular religious convictions of the writer. To people who, as in the case of Hindus, believed in gods and goddesses, to the animists who believed in spirits, to the Buddhists who believed in celestial beings and the several abodes of heaven and hell, it was only natural to impute to the Buddha supernatural and god-like qualities. He could perform miracles, communicate with the gods, transport himself to heaven, and so on.

And yet there are facts: his birth, his renunciation, his studies with gurus, his period of asceticism, his long period of intense meditation leading to enlightenment, his forty-five years devoted to teaching disciples, his establishment of the Sangha (the world’s oldest monastic order), his discourses - these are some of the facts that we know of the Buddha’s life.

These facts speak to the mind, the legends to the heart. Together they form a glorious story of a man who twenty-five centuries after his death is revered by millions world wide, not just in Asia, but in ever-increasing numbers in the western world.
BIRTH OF THE BUDDHA

The birth place of the Buddha-to-be was Kapilavastu, now part of Nepal, located close to its southern-most border. Kapilavastu was home of the Sakyas, a small Aryan tribe of the Gotama clan, ruled by his father, Suddhodana. His mother was Maha Maya - splendid, beautiful and steadfast, of the neighbouring tribe of Koliya.

As was the custom of the day, when Maha Maya approached the time for delivery, she wanted to return to her parental home. On their way to Koliya, Maya and her courtiers found themselves in Lumpini Grove, where she suddenly went into labour and gave birth to a son, in what was said to be a painless delivery. She died seven days later, and her younger sister, Prajapati, also wife to King Suddhodana, took on the responsibility of bringing up the child.

Soon after the birth, a sage and prophet named Asita came to see the boy, and declared that he was destined to be either a great king or great spiritual leader. Suddhodana then named his son Siddartha, meaning “he who has accomplished all his aims”, and to make sure that he would be a great king and not a great spiritual leader, he resolved to keep the boy always at home, in luxurious, palatial surroundings, with amusements and diversions to keep him happily occupied.

WHY SIDDARTHHA LEFT THE PALACE

At the age of sixteen, just after his demonstration of extraordinary martial skills, Siddartha married his first cousin Yasodhara. For the next thirteen years the young prince lived in luxury surrounded by the melodious music of sensuous female attendants, sumptuous food, and every possible pleasure and delight that he could wish for.

At the age of twenty-nine Siddartha Gotama ventured out of the palace grounds for the first time. As he rode forth into an unknown world, his eyes came upon four sights that were to change the course of his world: The first was an old man: his hair was grey, his back bent, teeth broken, supporting himself on a cane and trembling. The second was a sick man, body diseased and infected. The third sight was the corpse of a dead man; and the fourth a religious mendicant, a Brahmin monk who had left the world and adopted a homeless life in order to seek salvation.
Siddartha enquired of his charioteer, Channa, just what these sights were, and after he was told the meaning of old age, sickness and death, he knew what he must do.

Modern historians and scholars view these “four passing sights” as a way to impute supra mundane happenings to mundane events. The Buddha-to-be may be presumed to have had a sensitive nature, a probing mind, and extraordinary intelligence. By the age of twenty-nine he must have witnessed old age, sickness and death, despite the attempts by his father to insulate him, and he would have been so distressed by these manifestations of human suffering that he would have resolved to seek the cause and the cure.

So at the age of twenty-nine Prince Siddartha Gotama became a ‘renunciate’. He left his world of luxury, foregoing his inheritance and his future ascension to the rulership of the Sakyar, bid (silent) farewell to his beautiful wife and child, his concubines and worldly pleasures, and went forth into the world to seek knowledge and truth.

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

On the night of his departure he went into Yasodhara’s chamber, saw her sleeping with her hand on his son Rahula’s head, and although he sorely wished to raise her hand so he might gaze on his beloved son’s visage, he left without doing so, lest he wake his wife and risk being dissuaded by her from parting.

He then summoned Channa and told him to saddle his favourite horse; stealthily departing from the palace, they reached the river Anoma, beyond the territory of the Koliya. Siddartha dismounted, exchanged his princely clothes and ornaments for the rags of a passer-by, and told Channa to return to the palace and inform his father and wife that he had gone forth into the homeless life.
Siddartha Gotama then cut off his hair and went alone into the forests seeking those ascetics and teachers who might help him in his search. The first of these was Alara Kalama, a renowned Brahmin monk who resided at present-day Rajgir. His teachings were based on the belief in an eternal soul without which there could be no salvation. This did not appear to the Buddha-to-be to be the truth, so he left Alara, and turned to another renowned Brahmin monk, Udraka Ramaputra.

Udaka expounded on the effects of karma and the transmigration of souls, and although Siddartha believed in the doctrine of Karma - the concept of cause and effect that transcends individual lifetimes - he questioned the existence of an eternal soul. Nevertheless, through his studies with Udaka, as well as with Alar, he absorbed considerable knowledge of Brahmin-Hindu beliefs, some of which he retained in his own later teaching. He felt that even though they had taught him everything they knew and believed, they had left many of his questions unanswered, especially his questions about suffering, how it came about and how it could be eliminated. And so he continued his search elsewhere…

In the jungles of Uruvela, near present-day Bodhgaya, he came across five ascetics who were “keeping their senses in check, subduing their passions, and practising severe penance”.

For the next six years, in the company of the five ascetics, Siddartha applied himself to self-mortification and the most severe penance. He ate so little that his body wasted away, to the point that when he put his hand on his abdomen he could feel his spine.
ENLIGHTENMENT

One day, after he had bathed himself in the river and was so weak that he could barely rise from the water, he decided that just as over-indulgence is not the path to truth, neither is austere asceticism and deprivation, but rather a path to death end to his striving for enlightenment. Therefore, he determined to begin nourishing his body again. When he announced his decision, the five ascetics renounced him and abandoned him.

A local girl named Sujata saw the starving Siddartha and prepared a meal of special rice-milk and offered it to him in a golden bowl. Revived by Sujata’s rice-milk, he recalled the meditation he had experienced when he was seven years old and decided that he would now sit and meditate intensely, concentrating uninterruptedly on the nature of life, the nature of reality, the nature of self, and especially on the nature of suffering - its cause and its elimination. He walked to the nearby town of Bodhgaya and sat down under a Bodhi tree.

How long he meditated is not truly known. Some commentaries say seven days, some as many as forty-nine days. However long his meditation might have lasted he arose at last as the Buddha, the “Enlightened One”.

So great an event later inspired wonderful legends. The most famous concerns the re-appearance of Mara, the Evil One, who came to the future Buddha as he sat under the Bodhi tree, and summoned all his forces to attack him. Storms, hot rocks, burning coals, sand and mud were all hurled at the Buddha but with no effect. Then Mara summoned his daughters Desire, Discontent, and Passion, but their efforts were in vain.

And then, touching his finger to the ground before him, Gotama asked the earth to bear witness to his rightful struggle for enlightenment, whereupon the earth responded with a frightful roar, and the Earth Goddess created a monstrous flood drowning all of Mara’s demon legions.

As dawn was breaking on the day of the full moon of Visakha (the same day as his birth and eventual death) Gotama achieved full enlightenment. Later, the Buddha was to say that at the moment of his enlightenment, there arose in him the knowledge of his emancipation, the realization that the cycle of rebirth was ended for him. Ignorance was dispelled, and knowledge arose. Darkness was dispelled and light arose. And in the same discourse he said enlightenment comes similarly to anyone who is vigilant, strenuous and resolute in their practice of the Dharma.
WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT - THE MEANING OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Two extremes are to be avoided: the extreme of indulgence in sensuality and worldly pleasures, and the extremes of austerity, mortification and self-torture. Austerities produce confusion and sickly thoughts, while sensuality is enervating and makes man a slave of his passions. One should follow the Middle Path which keeps aloof from both extremes. One should satisfy the necessities of life, and keep one’s body in good health and one’s mind strong in order to comprehend the Four Noble Truths:

The first Noble Truth is the existence of suffering: Birth is suffering, sickness is suffering, old age is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, dejection and despair are suffering. Contact with unpleasant things, not getting what one wants are suffering. Suffering must be comprehended, and its cause given up.

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of suffering is craving or desire. Craving for pleasures, wealth, power, even craving for rebirth, create eventual suffering because of inherent greed and lust.

The Third Noble Truth is that anyone can eliminate the cravings (and thereby, the suffering) on his own, without the need of gods and priests to direct our beings.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the path leading to cessation of suffering. Known as The Eightfold Path, it consists of: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Buddha taught these fundamentals of what was to become one of the world’s great religious philosophies - a way of life towards individual salvation, and a path that is today followed by countless millions.
TEACHING THE TRUTH

The Buddha spent two months at Bodhgaya continuing his meditations, and then set off to find his old teacher. At the Deer Park of Isipatana, at Sarnath near Varasi, he came across the five ascetics who had been his former companions. At first they rebuffed him, but later, perceiving that there was something special about this man they had known a Siddartha Gotama, they came to be convinced by the Buddha’s message and became the first five disciples of the Sangha, the Buddhist monastic order.

For the next fifty years the Buddha travelled the length and breadth of what is now Northern India, teaching the Dharma to anyone willing to listen, from simple peasants to royalty, including his own family. He also instructed his monks to “teach”, not proselytize, out of Buddhist respect for all religions.

The spread of Buddhism for more than twenty-five hundred years has occurred because many millions of people have recognized in the Buddha’s teachings a truth intensely and personally meaningful to them, a path to their self enlightenment.

THE BUDDHA PASSES INTO NIRVANA

In his eightieth year the Buddha was stricken by a serious illness, the nature of which is not known, and declared that he would pass away in three months’ time. This sad news alarmed Ananda, the Buddha’s closest attendant, and he wept. He asked the Buddha what would happen to the Sangha after his death, to whom could the disciples turn to for instruction and inspiration? The Buddha answered that the disciples had learned from him everything he was able to teach them and that now they should “dwell as having refuge in themselves and not elsewhere”.

Ananda then asked what those disciples should do who had been accustomed to pay reverence to the Buddha when the Rainy Season had ended. The Buddha told him there were four places to which a faithful disciple might go, places that would rouse his devotion: LUMPINI GROVE, where the Buddha was born; BODHGAYA, where he attained enlightenment; SARNATH, where he delivered his first discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of the Doctrine; and KUSINARA (Kashinagar), where he would soon attain complete nirvana.
On what was to be the last day of his life and still seriously ill, he stayed in the mango grove of a smith named Cunda, who prepared for him a meal accidentally contaminated with a bacteria, which made the Buddha dreadfully sick, causing violent pains. Through the force of mindfulness and meditation the Buddha was able to control the pains, and continued on to Kusinara with Ananda.

Proceeding to a quiet grove, the Buddha laid down for the last time, his head pointing to the north, and received devotees from the village. Asking the five hundred assembled monks if any of them had any doubts, misgivings, or questions about any matter of the Dharma, all were silent.

With his last breath, the Buddha addressed this final advise to his disciples: “Decay is inherent in all compound things. Work on your salvation with diligence”. Then, as the founder of one of the world’s great religions, the compassionate teacher who showed mankind how to escape suffering, entered nirvana, lotus blossoms fell from heaven and covered his body.

Excerpts taken from “The Buddha’s Life” by Gerald Roscoe, edited by Max Holland.

**BUDDHA IMAGES**

Thais are a deeply religious people who consider all Buddhist images extremely sacred - no matter their age or condition. Sacrilegious acts are punishable by imprisonment, even when committed by (“ignorant”) foreign visitors. Several years ago, two Mormon missionaries posed for photographs on top of a Buddha image in Sukhothai. The developing lab in Bangkok turned the negatives over to a Bangkok newspaper, which published the offending photographs on the front page. Public outrage was so strong that the foreigners were arrested and put in jail. More recently, Sports Illustrated was refused permission to use religious shrines as backdrops for its swimsuit issue, and a Vogue model was arrested the following year for posing beside a religious monument in Phuket.

The icons, churches, temples and sacred places of any religious group should always be respected by others on their travels. Ignorance is scant excuse.
**MONKS**

Buddhist monks must also be treated with respect. Monks cannot touch, or be touched, by females, or accept anything from the hand of a woman.

Rear seats in buses are reserved for monks; other passengers should vacate these seats when necessary. Never stand over a seated monk since they should always remain at the highest elevations.

In general, it is best to treat them as respectfully as possible. Visitors are advised not to approach them in public, unless you are guided by a Thai who can mediate the interaction. The rules of interaction between monks and lay people are very clearly defined and observed. Unless you understand and adhere to the cultural rules, you will find yourself at best a fool, at worst in a very serious situation. Humility, understanding, deference, and respect will carry you a long way and enhance your stay in the Kingdom significantly.

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**TEMPLE DRESS CODES**

All Buddhist temples in Thailand have very strict dress codes, similar to Christian churches in the West. Shorts are not acceptable attire in Buddhist temples - men should wear long pants and a clean short-sleeved shirt.

Women are best covered in either pants or a long skirt, and shoulders (and other parts) should not be exposed.

Leather sandals are better than shoes since footwear must be constantly removed and left outside most buildings in Thailand. Rubber flip-flops are considered proper only in the bathroom, not religious shrines.

Buddhist temples are extremely sacred places; common sense dictates that you dress and act appropriately when visiting any place of worship.
TEMPELS

The intense colours and rich visual imagery of Buddhist temples (wats) are almost an assault to the eyes of the average cold climate visitor to Thailand. Gaudy, sometimes rather ostentatious, but always exciting, they will long remain in the memory as typifying Thailand: an intensely - but never intolerantly - religious country.

There are so many temples that even a small village is likely to have a miniature version of the massive edifices of Bangkok’s most prestigious religious monuments.

In Northern Thailand, a temple is much more than a place of worship. The wat is the centre of village life, serving (at times) as a school, orphanage, theatre, meeting hall, crematorium, youth club, playground - even sometimes a market, political centre or restaurant. Although one’s behaviour must always be correct and polite in a temple, there is no feeling of remoteness or superiority in a Thai wat; it is a repository for all aspects of the life and spirit, as well as the spirituality of the community it serves.

Thais love to “make merit” with Buddha by donating religious objects to temples. These are always accepted, which means that temples are cluttered with religious bric-a-brac. The richer the populace the more extensive and impressive the objects donated. Several years ago, a poor lady won six million baht in the national lottery. She spent all the money on the building of a new temple, so staying poor but making enough merit to assure her of a good reincarnation at her death. Truly a long term investment!

Although wats are exclusively Buddhist, there are elements of pre-Buddhist, Hindu beliefs in most temples. Hindu gods such as Shiva may have their statues included, and Thais combine Buddhism with ancient animist beliefs so that temples have become centres of local superstition as well as Buddhism. For many visitors, wats can become ‘too much’. Having seen a few, they merge in the mind’s eye into an unfathomable riot of strange sculptures and bright colours.

Without some understanding of the design and function of the various parts, the brain can switch off and “no more temples” is the unfortunate response.

A wat is a complex of several buildings. There is no fixed pattern, but in general the largest and most central building is the viharn. This building will have one or more Buddha statues at the far end (Buddhas should always face east), before a large open area for the general public. In this area people come to worship, and to receive instructions from the monks. The chief monk (or Abbot) may have a special low dias of ornamented wood to the left of the altar area. The walls of the viharn are usually decorated with murals depicting the life of Buddha. These vary from exquisite ancient depictions to less artistic modern ones.

To one side of the viharn there will usually be one or more chedis. These conical structures of
brick, coated with plaster painted white or covered in brass or gold, are said to resemble piles of rice. When asked at his death how he should be remembered, Buddha replied “Make piles of rice to remember me by”. Chedis contain the bones or other relics of religious leaders. The most prestigious (giving the temple the name of Wat Prathat or Wat Mahathat) contain relics of Buddha himself. Many Thais on cremation have their remains interred into the side of a chedi, identified by a small plaque set into the surface.

The bot is the building where monks are ordained. It may contain the most sacred Buddha sculpture, but is often closed when not in use, and the building may be quite small, tucked away in a corner. The area of consecrated ground is marked by eight black stones around the corners and axes of the bot.

Most temples also contain a library, usually a decorated wooden building raised on a podium, and a sala where novice monks or orphaned children are educated by ordained monks. It is customary to have a bodhi tree within the temple grounds. It was under this thick trunked tree with heart shaped leaves that Buddha became “enlightened”. To one side of the temple grounds, identified by the saffron robes hanging out of windows, are the monks’ quarters. Monks administer, clean and look after the wat, as well as teaching and meditating in it.

All temples are covered in small, highly reflective mosaics of coloured glass. Their significance is to drive away evil spirits - if they approach too close they will see their reflection and be frightened away. There are other precautions to ward off bad spirits, including the monster figures often guarding doorways. Many temples are approached by long flights of steps, guarded at the base by pairs of fearsome serpent heads (nagas) whose long scaly backs form the walls on either side of the steps.
The naga is a serpent which can change shape at will. One guarded Buddha in the wilderness by growing seven heads to form an umbrella over Buddha’s head, and promised to give his body for use by Buddha for all time. Candle-holders near the altar within the wat are normally made in the form of a naga.

Singhas are very popular in Northern Thailand. These are stylised lion statues, and originate in Burmese folklore. They represent strength and power and are usually depicted with mouth half open, seated outside temple door, or devouring a frightened victim. The Kala is a monster that devours itself, representing the relentless passage of time. It is usually shown without its lower jaw, which it has already eaten. Originally a Hindu god, it is often seen above windows and doors. Kinnari are beautiful women above the waist, but with the wings and legs of a bird. They are companions to the gods, and are Himalayan and animist in concept. Ornate Kinnari are popular in Chiang Mai temples.

The Hongse is a mythical swan-like creature, the mount of the god Brahma. It is often seen in northern Thailand as a decoration for ornamental gates or standing on a tall pole in front of the wiharn. All temples contain at least one, and usually many, Buddha images. They can be made from a wide range of materials, but are commonly brick-based and covered in cement or plaster stucco. Smaller or more venerable statues will be made of molded bronze, brass or gold. In front of the main image in every temple will be an arrangement of offerings, including lotus blossoms covered in a tea cosy-like hood of dried flowers; bronze or copper money trees and commonly a host of lesser Buddha statues, donated by worshippers to make merit.
The physical features of Buddha are largely determined by convention. These vary over time and from place to place. All Buddhas though, have certain features in common. There is a lotus bud on the head to symbolise enlightenment, and very long earlobes which show he was of a royal family who wore such heavy earrings that the ears became lengthened. The fingers are, in most styles, of equal length, as are the toes.

Some statues of Buddha are very different. The Chinese favour an obese, pot bellied Buddha. One at Doi Tung has a large deep navel in which visitors are invited to toss coins. This Buddha is associated with happiness, wealth, food and plenty. A fine example towers over the food market at Chiang Rai. An emaciated statue refers to Buddha’s experiment as an ascetic - when he decided that total self denial was unnecessary, until he subsequently developed the idea of ‘the middle path’.

Buddha may be pictured in number of different poses. Most usually he is seated cross legged, which indicated meditation. If the right hand is raised, palm outwards, this indicates that Buddha is imploring peace. With left hand raised, palm up, he is teaching. If two fingers are held up, he is blessing. If both hands are down, then Buddha has achieved enlightenment.

The reclining Buddha, in which he is seen resting on a cushion with one arm holding his head, refers to the death of Buddha - the point at which he achieved nirvana.

The walking Buddha refers to walking meditation - regarded as very difficult by most monks. Standing with both hands raised, palms outwards, is a sign of power and refers to a legend in which Buddha stopped the sea from engulfing a village by adopting this pose.

All Buddha images (and temples) are designed according to precise convention. The sculptor has no artistic freedom in which to work. The changes through time and place of the statues is a catalogue of cultural evolution, not artistic development.
THE THAI CHARACTER

All visitors to Thailand find the local people to be charming, polite, good-natured and fun. Despite the ease with which foreigners and Thais appear to accept each other, the average Thai thinks in a very different way from the westerner. However, since it is an important part of Thai social behaviour to ‘reflect’ and agree with the views of others, these differences rarely appear.

Westerners’ minds tend to follow the rules of fact and logic, generally speaking of course. The typical Thai is, however, far more intuitive. Ask a Thai monk “when was this temple built and by whom?”, and he is likely to answer, “It doesn’t matter, it is more important to feel its spirit”. Whereas most westerners might mistrust feelings as being difficult to analyse and therefore unsafe, the Thai does not trust ‘alleged fact’ in a society where it is sometimes important and acceptable to hide the so-called truth - ‘true’ to whom? And at what expense?

The extreme politeness of the Thais is very necessary in a society in which social harmony is paramount. To preserve this harmony it is frequently necessary to hide one’s true feelings. The greatest compliment is to be described as jai yen (cool heart), which means the ability to always appear calm and in control, whatever the circumstances. Thais will rarely criticize an individual in their presence. As well as making that person ‘lose face’, and so being socially unacceptable, it would also challenge the right to make one’s own decisions. Of many Thais might be said: “What I believe and do is right for me”. This attitude explains the great apparent tolerance of Thais, but it is only apparent. Although the eccentric and deviant will never be made to feel uncomfortable, Thais will secretly gossip, scorn and deride the unconventional since Thai society is actually quite rigid. For the topless western sunbather or joint-smoking hippie, the Thais might feel embarrassment and disgust, but will never let the oblivious foreigners know their cultural mistakes. It is therefore important to read the section on etiquette carefully. It is so easy to unwittingly cause offence and never know yourself what you have done. One cannot be too sensitive.
Status, and its outward manifestations, are very important to Thais. They do not have a rigid caste or class structure, but every Thai knows exactly where they fit in a very complex mix of factors which determine their position. Age, family, occupation and wealth are some of the more obvious factors. All Thais respect their elders, and will use the term pee in front of the name of an older colleague or friend to mark this respect. Being a member of a wealthy or professional family brings respect, as do occupations such as monk (the most respected), doctor, teacher, headman, etc.

As Thailand has entered the “market economy”, wealth has become more significant in the individual’s position, and wealth is unashamedly displayed. The more gold you can wear the better. (Gold is an insurance policy, its value remains fairly constant, and in wearing it you have ready access to cash by pawning it, if need be, at one of the many pawnshops.) Rich individuals will commonly be adorned with heavy pendants, bracelets and rings of pure 24-carat gold. Cars have become a very important status symbol. Despite the huge tax on imported vehicles, many Thais will make great sacrifices to buy a BMW or Mercedes.

Buddhism, which is a vital factor in the life of almost every Thai, teaches that ‘life is suffering’ - so make the best of the good times as they may not last. Thais tend not to think too much about the future, but to enjoy to the full the present. They tend to buy on credit, looking not at the total price but how much they must pay for something now. “We cannot see tomorrow” is a very common Thai expression. They never miss an opportunity to have fun - sanuk - since it may be their last chance... or yours!

Thais do not have a concept of “sin” and “guilt” in the same way that Christians understand these terms. They do not believe in a supernatural being watching over their actions and judging them. The individual is free to behave well or badly, according to his own conscience - not according to the “will of god” which underlies western thought and culture.
ETIQUETTE

Thai value systems regarding dress, social behaviour, religion, authority figures, and sexuality are much more conservative than those of the average Westerner. Although the Thais are an extremely tolerant and forgiving race of people blessed with a gentle religion and an easygoing approach to life, visitors would do well to observe proper social customs to avoid embarrassment and misunderstanding.

Thai people are extremely polite and their behaviour is tightly controlled by etiquette, much of it based on their Buddhist religion. It is, if nothing else, an extremely non-confrontational society, in which public dispute or criticism is to be avoided at all costs. To show anger or impatience or to raise your voice is a sign of weakness and lack of mental control. It is also counter productive, since the Thai who will smile, embarrassed by your outburst of anger or frustration is far less likely to be helpful than if you had kept better control of your emotions.

Revealing clothing, worn by either men or women, is a little disgusting to most Thais. Short shorts, low-cut dresses and T-shirts and skimpy (or no) bathing suits come into this category. In temples, long trousers or skirts must be worn, and monks should on no account be touched in any way by women (or men for that matter). Shoes should always be removed when entering temples and private houses. For this reason, most Thais wear slip-on shoes to avoid constantly tying and untying laces. The head is the most sacred part of the body, so should not be touched. The feet are the least sacred, so when sitting they should not point at anyone - most Thais sit on the floor with their feet tucked under their bodies behind them. To point, particularly with one’s foot, is extremely insulting.

Avoid touching Thai people, it is too intimate a gesture and an invasion of personal space. When eating, it is considered very rude to blow your nose or to lick your fingers. The right hand must be used to pick up food that is eaten with the fingers.

Clothing from the lower parts of the body should never be left anywhere in a high position. This applies particularly to socks and underwear, but also to shorts and skirts. This is the case even when washing and drying clothes. Thais have two clothes lines - a high one for most clothes and a low one for underwear and socks. Some laundries will not accept underware for cleaning - they would be impressed with your asking if this is the case.

Thais do not traditionally shake hands; the wai is the usual greeting. The hands are placed together as in prayer, and raised upwards towards the face, while the head is lowered in a slight bow. The height to which the hands should be raised depends on the status of the person you are waiing.
In the case of monks, dignitaries and old people the hands are raised to the bridge of the nose; with equals only as far as the chest. Young people and inferiors are not waid, but nodded slightly to. You will be regarded as a little foolish should you wai to them, or go about waiing everyone, putting them on the spot and making yourself appear foolish. When you consider that shaking hands, and kissing, are perhaps the easiest means of passing germs, the wai is in fact a suitable greeting.

It is very easy, when entering a foreign culture for the first time, to make mistakes in etiquette. If you do so, just smile, politely wai the person you may have offended, and all is usually forgiven.

I have seen many a western man married to a Thai arrive home late, a little worse for wear, and get into an argument with his wife. As is the way of women the world over, the subject of the argument rarely relates to the offence, confusing the poor man further. The offence is neither coming home late or being ‘in his cups’ - it is that he has caused her to lose ‘face’ by his actions.

All he really had to do on entering his house was wai his wife in apology, and in a suitably humble manner. She would forgive him. How could she not?! And, having received forgiveness he would politely ask what was for dinner...

Thais are famous for their smiles. But beware! The Thai smile can say many things, from “I love you” to “I am about to kill you!” Thais smile when they are happy, amused, embarrassed, uncertain, wrong, annoyed or furious. As westerners, we are not generally able to interpret the type of smile we are receiving - just be aware that it may not mean what you think it means, and proceed with caution.
MODEST DRESS

A clean and conservative appearance is absolutely necessary when dealing with border officials, customs clerks, local police, and bureaucrats. A great deal of ill feeling has been generated by travellers who dress immodestly. When in doubt, look at the locals and dress as they do.

Shorts are considered improper and low-class attire in Thailand, only acceptable for schoolchildren, street beggars, and common labourers …not wealthy tourists! This is changing somewhat nowadays, especially in tourist areas, and if long, loose, clean and tasteful shorts are worn with an equally acceptable top, you will be OK. Except at beach resorts, you should never wear skimpy shorts, halter tops, low-cut blouses, or anything else that will offend the locals. Long slacks and a collared shirt are recommended for men in urban environments. Women should keep well-covered. Swimwear is only acceptable on the beach.

It you’re really an outrageous and flamboyant type of individual, go ahead and be yourself since Thais accept eccentric behaviour from town crazies and oddball Westerners. Otherwise, if you prefer to be treated as a ‘normal’ human being, dress conservatively and try to blend into local society.

EMOTIONS

‘Face’ is very, very important in Thailand. Candour and emotional honesty - qualities highly-prized in some Western societies - are considered embarrassing and are often counterproductive in the East. If at all possible, do not lose your temper or raise your voice, no matter how frustrating or desperate the situation may seem to you. Only patience, humour, and jai yen (cool heart) bring results in Thailand.

The use of the word ‘heart’ (jai) is very common in the Thai language. Here are but a few examples; jai rawn = angry/hot-tempered; nam jai = feelings; nork jai = unfaithful (adulterous); jai dee = good-hearted; jai dahm = black-hearted/bad. A whole book can be written on the different types of ‘hearts’ or ‘temperaments’ one can have (in fact, one has been, Heart Talk by C G Moore, and is available in most bookstores, at least in Thailand).
On the business front, you may be interested in reading Working with the Thais: A Guide to Managing in Thailand, by Henry Holmes and Suchada Tangtongtavy. This book is a serious attempt to make clearer to the expatriate the differences between Thais and expatriates working together. Intended for both newcomers and seasoned foreigners in Thailand, it provides useful steps to deepen your understanding, respect, and abilities to forge lively cooperation and teamwork with your Thai colleagues. Through reports, and personal observations by Thais and expatriates, the book helps you to maintain touch with reality, as well as your sense of humour.

**PERSONAL SPACE**

Thai anatomy has its own special considerations. Thais believe that the head - the most sacred part of the body - is inhabited by the kwan, the spiritual force of life. Never pat a Thai on the head even in the friendliest of circumstances. Standing over someone older, wiser, or more enlightened than yourself is also considered rude behaviour since it implies social superiority. As a sign of courtesy, lower your head as you pass in front of a group of people. When in doubt, watch the Thais. Conversely, the foot is considered the lowest and dirtiest part of the body. The worst possible insult to a Thai is to point your unholy foot at his sacred head. Keep your feet under control; fold them underneath when sitting down, don’t point them toward another person, and never place your feet on a coffee table. This is a sure way to display your ignorance and uncoothness. The left hand is also unclean and should not be used to eat, receive gifts, or shake hands. Aggressive stances such as crossed arms or waving your arms are also considered boorish (Italians beware!).
THE WAI: A GRACEFUL GESTURE

Thailand’s traditional form of greeting is the wai, a lovely prayer-like gesture accompanied with a lowering of the head.

Social status is indicated by the height of your wai and depth of your bow: inferiors initiate the wai, while superiors return the wai with just a smile. Under no circumstances should you wai waitresses, children, or clerks - this only makes you look ridiculous! Save your respect for royalty, monks, elders, ‘superiors’, and immigration officials.

The wai can be used to great effect on foreigners. Imagine if you will that you have just arrived from a delayed 12-hour flight; you are hot, tired, and somewhat short-tempered. You arrive at your hotel to be greeted by the beautiful wais of the staff. This graceful unexpected gesture can easily dispel your short temper, making you content (sabai jai).
THAI FOOD:

AN INTRODUCTION TO THAI CUISINE

The following introduction is taken from the menu at Maekok River Village Resort.
The Management and staff of Maekok River Village Resort extend you a warm welcome and hope
the following notes will help you enjoy your meal. We take great pleasure in informing you that
our “Thai Food Dishes” are widely acclaimed throughout the hotel and restaurant industry as being
amongst the best in Thailand. We are working hard to maintain that status.

The difference between Thai and European cuisine lies not only in the ingredients used and the style
of cooking, but in the manner in which individual dishes are selected to form the meal. A group of
Thais ordering a meal would start by selecting one or more appetisers (aharn len) to be nibbled,
accompanied by a drink, whilst each group member selects one or two dishes from the menu as his
or her contribution to the meal.

The individual choices are then the subject of much animated discussion to ensure that each dish
selected compliments those chosen by the other members of the group, thus forming a well-rounded
and balanced meal to be enjoyed by all.

Once the meal has been ordered, (3 to 5 dishes are typical for a group of 2-4 people), they are
placed on the guest’s table. The meal is commenced once all group members have been served their
first portion of rice. Soups are invariably served in a soup kettle with each guest being provided
with a small soup bowl, but the meal is served as a single course, fruit and coffee being ordered
after the main meal.

“Thai Etiquette” requires that each guest transfers only a spoonful from a particular dish onto his
plate at one time. This spoonful is then eaten accompanied by rice before taking a spoonful from
another dish, and so on.

The most common mistake made during the meal by non-Thais
is the tendency to ladle a spoonful of each dish onto their
plate (buffet-style) before they commence eating. This mixes
all the individual tastes of each dish together, so should be
avoided, as should the option of taking too much at one
time.
THE PACE OF THE MEAL
The meal should be eaten slowly with particular favourites reordered, or alternative dishes added to compliment the meal. Thai customers invariably order rice by the “bowl” for the group allowing the waitress to replenish each guest’s rice as required.

SPICY FOOD SELECTION
Spices are integral to the taste of Thai food. Not all Thai dishes are hot, many are mild or not spicy at all. The “Spiciness” of any particular dish can be diluted by mixing a little of it with a spoonful of rice. In this way, almost anybody can enjoy “hot dishes” and the brave amongst you a “very hot” dish. Asking for a traditionally “Spicy Dish” to be toned down will only ruin the taste of that particular dish, and possibly offend the chef.

ORDERING YOUR MEAL
Please bear in mind that you are in the “far north” of Thailand and that the staff are recruited from the surrounding villages. They are eager to please in the manner of all rural folk but are sometimes confused by the many different versions and dialects of the English language.

Please decide exactly what you want to eat before ordering and then order your meal in “slow and clear English” using the menu code number provided.

To prepare for your tastebuds for the trip, you may want to have a look at one of the many excellent books available on Thai food, such as “The Taste of Thailand”
NORTHERN THAILAND:  
THE LANDSCAPE

Flat valleys filled to the brim with the lush, iridescent green of growing rice, surrounded by sharp-peaked forested hills and mountains characterize the scenery of Northern Thailand.

The paddy fields of the lowlands are immensely fertile, fed with nutrients by the erosion of topsoil from the nearby hills, and producing two or three rice crops a year. A complex system of irrigation channels and low mud walls to trap the water in which the young rice grows produces a patchwork of vivid greens, broken only by the scattered villages of bamboo and teak and the extravagant colours and designs of Buddhist temples. In the fields, teams of farm workers can be seen planting, weeding or harvesting the rice, assisted by the water buffaloes, giant but placid grey or pink beasts ubiquitous to South East Asia.

The hills which look down on these fertile lowlands are a different world. They are naturally covered in dense tropical forest, with a huge number of species of trees. At low levels the trees are small and spindly, losing their leaves in the long dry season. At higher altitudes, where the rainfall is greater and the temperature lower, the size, density and lushness of the forest increases, culminating in cloud forest above 2000 metres, where the trees are covered in a thick flora of epiphytic mosses, ferns and creepers. It is at these higher altitudes that the dazzlingly beautiful and highly prized orchids can be found - perhaps the most familiar symbol of northern Thailand.

The predominant limestone rock leads to the formation of a myriad of caves and potholes, many still undiscovered and unexplored. Home to bats and cave swifts, they are sacred places to the Thais, who for hundreds of years have decorated them with shrines and Buddha images. Many contain artifacts from earlier civilizations, still a puzzle to archaeologists.

The people of the hills scrape a precarious living by burning the forest to create temporary fields in which they grow a meagre crop of mountain rice and other vegetables. Some grow opium at higher altitudes, both as a cash crop and to fuel their own addiction. The vast majority of these hill peoples are not Thai, but belong to a variety of different hilltribes, each with its own customs, language and costume.
CLIMATE

Northern Thailand has a typical monsoon climate, but since it lies well north of the equator (between 17 and 20 degrees North), it does experience marked seasonal temperature variations. The ‘wet season’ monsoon rains start around early June and continue until October. Temperatures in the lowlands are around 32 degrees C in the mid-afternoon, falling to a minimum of around 23 degrees C at night. It rains on most days but rarely continuously. A typical day will dawn bright and sunny, clouds build up during the afternoon leading to heavy rain for an hour or two, frequently followed by a clear evening. In August and September, typhoons sometimes occur (although rarely severe), with heavy rain, thunderstorms and high winds for three of four days.

In the ‘cool season’ from early November to February, humid tropical air from the Indian ocean gives way to cold, dry air originating in Central Asia to the North. The sun is still high enough to send temperatures above 28 degrees C during the afternoon, but following sunset the temperature drops rapidly, frequently to below 10 degrees C, so that early mornings are delightfully cool and misty. The sky is generally cloudless all day, and rain is very unlikely - perhaps one shower a month. From December, many of the trees lose their leaves as a protection against drought, and the lush greens of the countryside give way to sombre browns.

The ‘hot season’ is mercifully short - from mid-March to late May or early June. As the sun climbs higher in the sky, daytime temperatures approach 40 degrees C, and humidity increases, making any exertion difficult.
During this season the jungle is burnt off to prepare for next season’s planting, so the hills are very smoky and dusty. The start of the rains, (usually a massive thunderstorm) brings relief as the temperatures drop. Temperatures decrease and rainfall increases with altitude, so the ‘wet season’ is significantly wetter and cooler in the hills. In the ‘cool season’, temperatures below freezing at night are not uncommon above altitudes of 1500 metres. Do not go into the hills unprepared.

**CHIANG MAI**

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Temperature figures in degrees Celsius | Average Max / Min for each month.

The average min and max temperature variation for BAN THATON is greater than that of Chiang Mai & Chiang Rai due to the cooler nights dictated by its altitude above sea level (512m). For this reason air-conditioning is only, if at all, used in the ‘hot season’. For the rest of the year, fans suffice during the day, a campfire is lit at night, and extra blankets are made available to guests. Once again, prepare your wardrobe properly for these parts in the cool season.
THE HISTORY OF NORTHERN THAILAND

Northern Thailand has been inhabited since prehistoric times. The remains of bronze age settlements have been found at several sites, including Phayao and Soppong. Two thousand years ago the Lawa, now a remote and little-visited hilltribe, were the dominant culture. The first related Thai culture to colonize the area lived in northern Burma, and spilled into Western Thailand, where they are still found today and known as the Tai Yai (high (or big) Thais). The province of Mae Hong Sorn still has a preponderance of these peoples.

The origins of modern Thai peoples (who make up 80% of the population of Thailand) are obscure and the subject of much debate. Until recently, it was believed that the Thais originated in Southern Mongolia, and were pushed southeast by the expansion of the Chinese empire. More recently, evidence has come to light suggesting that a race known as the Austro- Thais in Southeast Asia were among the first people to develop agriculture and an advanced civilization which spread first north into southern China, then re-colonised their former territory in a southern migration several centuries later. Whichever theory is correct, there was, without doubt, contact and eventually conflict between Thai and Chinese, which continued for many centuries.

The Thai civilization was first threatened in the 9th Century BC by the Tartars of Central Asia, who over a period of 600 years split the Thais into three groups. One group migrated southwest to colonize eastern Burma and western Thailand, and became known as the Shan or Tai Yai (mentioned above). Another group moved east to the Gulf of Tonkin, and the third, destined to be the modern day inhabitants of Thailand, moved less far, to the southern part of what is now Szechuan in southwest China. Here, they established a number of city-states, which although at the time independent, came more and more under the sway of the developing Chinese empire. During this period, Buddhism became accepted as the religion of the Thais, introduced by Sinhalese monks from Sri Lanka.

In the first century AD, the Chinese attempts to absorb the Thais led to battles in which the Thais were overwhelmingly defeated, and over the next two centuries they moved steadily south towards their present home. In the 5th Century AD, internal dissent in China allowed the Thais still in China to establish an independent kingdom known as Nan-Chao, stretching from Tibet in the west to Szechuan in the north and controlling most of what is now Laos and Burma. China was forced to respect this new kingdom which withstood many invasion attempts, at times allied with the kingdoms of Tibet but eventually turning against them (with China as an ally!) when it became too powerful. In 863 AD, the Thais seized the town of Tonkin (now Hanoi).

In the following centuries the Thais attempted to extend their control into the south of the Chinese
empire, but eventually were conquered and made a Chinese province under Kublai Khan in 1253 AD. Many Thais still live in an area of southern Yunnan known as ‘Sipsong Panna’. The conflicts described above had caused a steady trickle of Thai people southwards and across the Maekhong River into northern Thailand, where they settled particularly in the areas now occupied by the cities of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Sukhothai. Here they would come into contact with two Indian based cultures. The Khmers, whose pineapple shaped chedis can be seen throughout central Thailand, were based in Cambodia, and had been extending east and northwards. The Mons, another culture with Indian roots, were established further west and north.

The first Thai king to control territory in northern Thailand had as his capital the town of Chiang Saen, established in 733 AD, on the banks of the Maekhong. Over the next two centuries, Chiang Saen was destroyed by an earthquake and seized for short periods by the Khmers and later by the Vietnamese, who were driven out and, in turn, had their territory seized by Chiang Saen, which also at times controlled most of Laos and Cambodia. In succeeding centuries, the royal families of Chiang Saen came to establish principalities in Phayao and Chiang Rai, the territory of northern Thailand was held by a powerful tribe, the Mons, who controlled large areas of Southeast Asia. In the 13th century, a Thai king, Mengrai, drove the Mons from their northern bastions, the empire known as Haripunchai, and extended his kingdom south to Lampang and the Haripunchai capital of Lamphun.
He called his new enlarged kingdom ‘Lan-Na-Thai’, meaning “land of a million rice fields,” and brought prosperity and stability to the whole area. Many towns and temples were built, and arts and crafts were encouraged. Administration was organized around rice growing; each person was given enough land to grow 5 muen of rice (about 60 kilos). Nobles were given more land, a prince 1000 rice fields. Princes were given new lands on the edge of established territories and so acted as a bulwark against external attack.

Mengrai first established and fortified the city of Chiang Rai, in which he kept his palace until he died. The name ‘Chiang Rai’ is believed to have initially been ‘Chiang Moi’ (footprint of the elephant), since according to legend an elephant led Mengrai to the spot on which the city was built. He then moved south establishing and defending new towns in Fang, Kumkarn and Chiang Mai in 1296 A.D., the latter being in such a good position that it became the capital of the new kingdom. From Chiang Mai, Mengrai moved south in 1281 A.D. to take the the city of Lamphun from the Mons by using Lawa hill tribe allies to spread dissent in the city, thus ensuring little resistance when Mengrai’s army appeared. Fourteen years later, in an unsuccessful attempt to retake the city, the king of Lamphun led an army from Lampang to the emerging kingdom of La-Na-Thai.
Sukhothai, which was to be the capital of a united Siam in later centuries, had until the 13th century been controlled by the Khmer civilization based in Cambodia. However, much of the population was Thai (the result of an earlier colonisation) and they eventually overthrew their Khmer masters. In 1287 A.D. King Mengrai of Lan-Na, King Ramakhamphaeng of Sukhothai, and King Ngam-Muong of Phayao made an allegiance which led to the expulsion of all other claimants to control Northern Thailand, and laid the groundwork for the first Thai kingdom of Siam.

At the height of his power, Mengrai controlled a large kingdom in North Thailand and received tributes from many other kingdoms in Southeast Asia. He is said to have been killed at the age of eighty by a lightning bolt whilst visiting his son in Chiang Mai, the site marked by a statue which can still be seen in the centre of the city.

Over the next centuries, the fortunes of Lan-Na-Thai waxed and waned, with a long list of battles with neighbouring states, led by heroic kings and princes mounted on elephants. Military might, deceit, and treachery determined the outcome of these confrontations, aided or abetted by supernatural talismans and spirits. Despite these squabbles, Lan-Na continued to enjoy prosperity, the wars of the nobility usually affected the average inhabitant but little. Lan-Na enlarged, absorbing Phayao, Phrae and Nan, and resisting domination from the emerging state of the central plains - the Ayutthaya empire. However, in the 14th century the kingdom of Luang Prabang in Laos took territory from Lan-Na-Thai along the Maekhong, including the city of Chiang Khong, and caused the official capital of Lan-Na-Thai to be moved to Chiang Mai in 1345.

The 15th century was the golden age of Chiang Mai, when Lan-Na art and power reached its peak during the reign of King Tilokaraja. He was a great warlord and a devout Buddhist, able in 1455 AD to arrange the eighth world Buddhist council in Chiang Mai. The fact that this was feasible attests to the power, wealth, safety and communications that Lan-Na enjoyed. It was not to last long, though. Squabbling between pretenders to the throne by a succession of kings and princes weakened the nobility.

In 1545 AD Chiang Mai suffered a devastating earthquake, and in 1558 AD Chiang Mai was taken by the Burmese empire of Pegu. Most of Lan-Na remained under Burmese control for over 200 years, although for much of the population the effects were barely noticeable except during the odd small-scale rebellion, when the Burmese would sack a rebellious dukedom as a punishment. There was no direct colonization, but annual tributes to Pegu had to be paid, and a Burmese prince sat on the throne in Chiang Mai. Once secure in Lan-Na, the Burmese nobility looked to extend their influence further, particularly towards the kingdom of Ayutthaya to the south. Finally, in 1767 AD, the Burmese King Syn Byu Shin took and sacked Ayutthaya, destroying most of the culture and
heritage of this previously magnificent city.
Now secure in most of central Southeast Asia, the Burmese, together with an army recruited from Lan-Na, turned their attention eastwards, and mounted an attack on the empire of Luang Prabang (now Laos). The war drained Lan-Na of wealth and population, and pushed the people too far, leading to a series of determined rebellions. From the city of Tak, a general named Taksin achieved victories over the Burmese, and eventually became the first king of a new central Thai empire based at Thonburi (on the west bank of the Chao Phraya, opposite Bangkok). Further north, the chief of Lampang, Kawila, mounted a rebellion which led to the retaking of Chiang Mai, and the end of Burmese domination, in 1774 AD.

Taksin became the first king of a united Thailand, and appointed Kawila as governor of Chiang Mai. The City was in a state of awful disrepair, in fact it was a ghost town until the beginning of the 19th century. In 1781 AD Taksin was declared insane and executed. His successor, and former general, Phra Buddha Yod Fa, moved the capital of Thailand across the river from Thonburi to its present position at Krung Thep (Bangkok) on the east bank, more easily defended from any more Burmese attacks from the west. Phra Buddha established the Rama Dynasty who have ruled Thailand ever since (the present king, Bhumipol Adulyadej, is Rama IX). It was not until 1804 that the last toehold of the Burmese in Thailand, at Chiang Saen, was retaken.

In the 19th century, Lan-Na became an unnoticed backwater of Thailand. It was ruled by a series of ineffectual governors, and the population declined in number and vigour. In the mid 19th century, European powers began to view Lan-Na with interest.
The French established an Indo-Chinese empire in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to the east, and the British controlled India and Burma to the west. It was a delicate time, with both superpowers eyeing Lan-Na and each other. It was largely thanks to the statesmanship of King Mongkut and his son Chulalongkorn that Lan-Na preserved its independence.

Territory was ceded to France to the east of the Maekhong River, and logging concessions given to the British. Much was made by the kings of Thailand of the importance of the neutral buffer zone between French and British dominions. There was a small skirmish with boats of the French navy over ownership of some tiny islands in the Mekhong River, and a rapid migration of Thais to the disputed area around Mae Hong Son which the British claimed because the population was more Burmese than Thai. King Chulalongkorn, belatedly realizing how ineffectually Lan-Na had been governed, appointed a talented High Commission to administer the north, and encouraged missionaries who imported not only Christianity (which was largely rejected by the Thais) but modern education, health care and administration.

In the 1920’s, a British governor was appointed by the king as Governor of Lampang. The railway reached Chiang Mai in 1927, which together with a comprehensive road building programme, drew Lan-Na into the mainstream of Thai life and prosperity.

NORTHERN THAI CULTURE
Northern Thailand is distinct in many ways from the rest of the country. Traditionally called “Lan-Na” it has for most of its history been a separate kingdom.

Northern Thai is a very different language from the official Bangkok Thai heard elsewhere in the country and varies considerably within northern Thailand itself. To complicate the picture further, northern Thailand is now the home to a number of different peoples, each with their own culture and language. In the far north west, Shan or Tai Yai people predominate. The Shan are closely related to the Thais and extend over a range centred in northern Burma (where Shan State has long been fighting for independence).

In addition, the nine or ten hill tribes of Northern Thailand maintain separate cultures and languages, despite gradual integration. This ethnic and cultural diversity is one of the reasons this area is so fascinating for the visitor.
Thailand is in general, a clean and health conscious country. The standard of medical care is good, and hospitals or health clinics can be found throughout the country. Most doctors speak good English (many are American or British medical school graduates). Treatment is not free but it is inexpensive. A stay in a Thai private hospital will cost around Baht 500 to Baht 750 per night for a private room (under US$20). The rooms are often comparable to that of a 3-4 star hotel: private bath & shower, western toilet, cable TV, room service, and a settee or fold out bed for your relatives or friends should they wish to stay with you during your illness. Unlike many Western hospitals, friends and family can visit anytime, not only during specified hours, and someone usually will spend the night consoling the patient.

It is not uncommon for foreigners to come to Thailand for inexpensive but good dental treatment or cosmetic surgery. A dental cap for example costs about US$50.

There is malaria in the north, but incidence is not high and limited mainly to the rainy season. The malarial mosquito only feeds in the middle of the night, and most hotels will spray your room with a mosquito repellent (at your request) whilst you are away having dinner.

Most restaurants and hotels serve only bottled drinking water and ice, tap water not being considered potable. 99% of food is fresh, but avoid eating in hill tribe villages. When trekking with a reputable company, all food will be supplied.

Generally people prefer not to take an anti-malarial tablet because of the possible side affects (drowsiness etc.) - sprays are a good enough option.

Many foreigners, having failed to find suitable cure for their ailments (such as dermatitis) through western medicine, try traditional and herbal based cures whilst in Thailand with some degree of success.

There is a drive on by NGO’s and Royal-sponsored projects to reduce the dependence on expensive western medicines for minor ailments, and revert to traditional remedies. This approach appeals to everyone but the pharmaceutical giants…
SAFETY

Many people who have travelled the world extensively find Thailand to be a ‘very safe’ country, ‘safer than home’.

It is generally quite safe for women travelling alone as well, both during the day and at night. Incidence of foreigners being molested or assaulted are extremely low and restricted in the main to ‘areas of ill-repute’, which are dangerous in any country. Nevertheless, one should always exercise caution and common sense. Beware of unusually slick strangers offering you incredible deals on gems or whatever. If it seems too good to be true, it usually is.

Remember, the Tourist Police in Thailand are an unusually good lot. They can be called on to assist you in any situation, whether you are being hassled or simply need a ride home. Special efforts are presently in force to safeguard visitors and ensure the pleasantness of their stay in the Kingdom during the ‘Amazing Thailand’ campaign, 1998-1999.
WHAT TO BRING WITH YOU ON A SOFT ADVENTURE HOLIDAY

Apart from your normal wardrobe of ‘holiday clothes’, those taking a ‘soft adventure’ holiday should consider the following additions (taken from the Track of the Tiger tour guide manual):

- T-shirt or similar x 2
- Shorts x 2
- Long cotton trousers
- Track suit (night use)
- Track shoes
- Foam slippers (thongs or flip-flops)
  - Hat or sun protector
  - Warm jacket or wind cheater (wind-breaker)
  - Swimming costume (suit) and towel
  - Photocopies of your passport x 2
  - Waterproof bags for camera, passport etc.
  - Sunglasses
  - Mosquito repellent
  - Camera and lots of film/cards (batteries if needed)
  - Small day pack
  - Pocket torch (or small flashlight)
  - A compact medical kit.

ON BARGAINING

Sadly, the concept of bargaining for goods in Thailand has been misconstrued and misinterpreted by guide books, foreigners, and vendors to a point where the beauty of the bargaining ‘process’ has been lost.

In an agrarian society such as Thailand largely still is, the daily routine of the farmer starts early and ends at dusk. There is little time for socializing beyond the temple fair and other festivals. Bargaining is little more than socializing as the following anecdote illustrates:

The farmer went to the market with his 5 kgs of mangoes to strike a deal with the chicken vendor for 1 or 2 chickens. Both parties know very well the value of each others’ produce, but bargaining is conducted as a form of conversational exchange. The farmer will start, for example, by praising the accomplishments of the vendor’s children at school.
The vendor, knowing that he will be expected to respond to the compliment by pricing his chickens fairly low, will compliment the farmer on the quality of his mangoes, and explain that fortunate as he may be with the scholastic ability of his children, he has mounting medical bills for his ailing mother-in-law.

If the farmer is a poor bargainer, he will concede, accepting two ‘scrawny chickens’ for his mangoes. If he is shrewd, he will already know of the mother-in-law’s ailments, and would have brought along some suitable local herbs as a ‘gift’, denying the vendor his escape route, and placing the onus or burden on the vendor to respond in kind.

The exchange becomes a forum for discussion on all things going on in the village as each party skilfully uses his knowledge to his best advantage. He also learns more of what is going on in the village than he would otherwise know.

Consider how impersonal the Western system is: ‘One chicken in a plastic packet please’. ‘Okay, sir, that’ll be two dollars.’ - end of exchange.

Enjoy your bargaining when in Thailand. Establish what price you want to pay for something, and accept that the vendor will probably quote from 40-60% higher than the sales price. Keep a certain amount of money in one pocket so that you may draw out ‘just enough’ to bring to the bargaining table. Exclaim how beautiful the craftsmanship of his handicrafts are, that you would dearly love to buy this or that particular item but...you have 9 children needing milk (& shoes!), a sick mother, and so on. Remember, it is an exchange of pleasantries whilst making a purchase, not an argument about pricing.
THE “HILLTRIBES”

One of the main tourist attractions of the north, the so-called hilltribes of northern Thailand have preserved their way of life with little change over thousands of years. Originating in different parts of Southeast Asia, mostly southern China, and resisting persecution by other cultures, they have migrated into Thailand in a quest for freedom and security.

Although the hilltribes might be regarded as “primitive” in that they pre-industrial, sometimes oral, vs. literate, societies, hilltribe communities are not merely groups of simple people living simple lives. Their customs, laws and beliefs are complex and very sophisticated, designed to harmonise relationships between individuals and to conserve their environment. It is only in recent years, with the effects of rapid population growth and competition for land, that their traditional way of life has proved to be insufficient to cope with the stresses resulting from external forces.

In Northern Thailand there are often several different hilltribe or minority ethnic groups living within a small geographical area, often sharing the same mountainside. Each group nevertheless has its own language, customs, religious beliefs and social organization. All the groups, however, are welcoming and hospitable to visitors, providing them with a unique opportunity to see and experience ways of life which have long been forgotten in the west. A visit to any of these peoples is always an experience that will stay with you for a lifetime.

THE DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS

THE KAREN

The Karen, (called Kaliang or Yang in Thai) are found along most of the length of the Thai-Burmese border. Their population is about 300,000 in Thailand, with over four million in Burma. They are concentrated mainly in Mae Hong Son province, and western areas of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Phayao. There are four main subgroups. The main groups are the Sgaw Karen (the most numerous) and the Pwo Karen. The world-famous Padaung, or “long-neck” Karen, and the Kayah are two other Karen subgroups.
The Karen costume for women is very attractive and distinctive. Unmarried girls wear loose white V-necked shifts, decorated with Job’s Tear seeds at the seams. Married women wear blouses and skirts in bold colours, predominantly red or blue. Men wear blue baggy trousers, with typically red-striped shirts, a simplified version of the women’s blouses. Black Karen men wear black shirts with a red cummerbund or head scarf.

Karen houses are not usually large. Adult children usually leave the home when married - there is no extended family housing in most Karen villages. Houses are on stilts, made of bamboo or teak. Central steps lead to a porch, with a store room or kitchen to one side, a living area and bedroom on the other. Beneath the house is a working area, often with a foot-operated rice pounder. The Karen have strict laws against immorality. They are matrilineal societies, so that two married women do not live in the same house. In some villages, the punishment for adultery is death. The village chief has great power over his community, and is regarded as the spiritual as well as the administrative leader.

THE HMOng

Called by the Thai Meo (a derogatory term since it means barbarian), the Hmong are found widely in northern Thailand. There are two sub-groups, White and Blue. Around and to the west of Chiang Mai, most of the villages are Blue Hmong, whereas in the east only White Hmong villages can be found. Their population in Thailand is about 70,000. They originate in western China, possibly Mongolia.

Blue Hmong women wear beautiful pleated skirts with parallel horizontal bands of red, blue and white, intricately embroidered. Jackets are of black satin, with wide orange and yellow embroidered cuffs and lapels. The hair is tied in a large bun. Men wear baggy black pants and jackets embroidered in a similar way to the women’s, closing over the chest with a button at the left shoulder. White Hmong women wear black baggy trousers with a long wide blue cummerbund with a central pink area which hangs almost to the ground. Their jackets are simple, with blue cuffs. A brimless blue cap is worn by some groups.

Hmong villages are usually at high altitudes, below the crest of a protecting hill. Houses have a dirt floor and a roof which extends almost to the ground. They live in extended families, with two or more bedrooms. There is a large guest platform. The headman has little power, since the Hmong are fiercely independent people who take orders from no one. Before marriage, promiscuity amongst the young is normal. Marriage is followed by a trial period before the bride price is paid. Hmong men are expected to do most of the work within the family. Men do the heaviest work, but in
practice this means they do little, and expect to be supported by their wives. The Hmong historically
grew much opium, and addiction rates in some villages are high, mainly among older males.
Hmong clothing is much in demand in Thailand, and the Hmong have proved in the last few years
to be good business people. Hmong women will be seen at markets throughout Thailand selling
their handicrafts. Although like the other tribes generally poor, some families have become quite
wealthy.

Some build the more expensive and comfortable Thai style houses, but in general the Hmong have
retained their traditional way of life.
There have been few converts to Christianity or Buddhism amongst the Hmong. They are strict
animists, whose shamans use dramatic methods to contact the spirits. Every house has an altar with
a piece of paper covered in cock’s feathers affixed with chicken blood.

THE AKHA
The poorest of the hill tribes, well known to tourists for their extraordinary costumes and
exotic appearance, the Akha originate from Tibet,
and have only recently entered Thailand, the first
immigrants arriving in 1911. They are less open to
change than many other hilltribes, proudly retaining
their old customs.

The women’s costume consists of broad horizontal
striped leggings, a short black skirt with a white
beaded sporran, a loose fitting black jacket
with heavily embroidered cuffs and lapels. The
headgear, which is rarely removed, is a conical
wedge of white beads interspersed with silver
coins and topped with plumes of red taffeta.
The man’s costume of plain black pants and
a lightly embroidered loose jacket is much
less impressive. The different subgroups of
Akha have slightly different costumes and
headgear.

The Akha generally live at high altitudes, in a
position offering good views over the surrounding country.
Their houses are on low stilts, with a large porch leading into a
square living area with a stove, usually at the back. The roof is steeply pitched. They are deeply superstitious, their religion prescribing exactly how each action should be performed. Any deviation from the correct ‘Akha way’ is believed to lead to disaster. All birth abnormalities, even twins, used to lead to the killing of the newborn by the elders of the tribes. This custom is now being curtailed, however.

Every Akha village is entered through ceremonial gates, decorated with carvings of “human” life to indicate to the spirit world that beyond here only humans can pass. Outside the gates are wooden sculptures of copulating couples, and the gates may be decorated with a wide variety of “human” artefacts - weapons, tools, and nowadays cars and airplanes. To touch these carvings, or to show any lack of respect, is punishable by fines or the donation of animals for sacrifices. The gates are replaced every year, so every village has a series of gates, the older ones in a state of decomposition and disrepair.

Peculiar to the Akha, there is a giant swing in each village. Every year, in August, there is a “swinging festival”, in which the headman, followed by the rest of the village, take turns using the swing. The reasons for this practice are unknown. Many Akha villages still grow opium, generally not of high quality. Opium addiction, especially amongst the older men, is a serious problem. The King’s Royal Project has contributed greatly to the alleviation of this problem.
THE LISU

The Lisu are a fiercely independent people, who are in general adjusting well to the changes taking place in their society. They originate in Eastern Tibet, and the first settlers arrived in Thailand at the beginning of this century. They are found mainly in the west, particularly between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, and also in western Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Phayao provinces.

The women wear brightly coloured costumes, consisting of a blue or green parti-coloured knee length tunic, split up the sides to the waist, with a wide black belt and blue or green pants. Long hair is tied at the back. Sleeves, shoulders and cuffs are heavily embroidered with narrow, horizontal bands of blue, red and yellow. At New Year festival, in mid-January, dazzling displays of wealth are worn, including waistcoats and belts of intricately fashioned silver and hats with multi-coloured pom-poms and streamers. Men wear green, pink or yellow baggy pants and a blue jacket opening vertically.

The Lisu live at moderate to high altitudes. Their houses are built on the ground, with dirt floors and bamboo walls around a central ridge. They live as extended families, the number of bedrooms depending on the family size. Unmarried girls have a private bedroom after puberty. Every home has an altar at the back of the communal living area with a shelf holding vessels and incense sticks honouring their ancestors.

Although promiscuous, courtship and marriage are highly stylized, involving a high “bride price”. There are twelve clans of Lisu, and marriage should be between members of different clans. The Lisu believe strongly in the spirit world, and their shamans are used to divine the causes and cures of all problems and sickness.

Many Lisu villages were involved in the opium trade, and are reputed to have grown the best opium. Addiction rates are declining, and the Lisu are responding well to alternative cash crop production, but the link between wealth and opium is still strong. A Lisu headman has little power over his community, with the clan system generally over-riding his authority.

THE LAHU

The Lahu tribes originated in southwest China, and have migrated into Thailand through northern Burma. Most of their settlements are concentrated close to the Burmese border, in Chiang Rai, northern Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son province. The Lahu language has almost become a “lingua franca”, spoken throughout the other hill tribes, since, amongst the Lahu, hiring out labour to other hill tribes has become common.
There are four tribes within the Lahu - Black, Yellow, Red and She-leh. The Black Lahu are the most reserved, but wear the most distinctive costumes. Women wear a black cloak with diagonal cream stripes. The top of the sleeve is decorated in bold colours of red and yellow, at the whim of the seamstress. Red Lahu women wear black trousers with white edging and vivid sleeves of broad red and blue stripes. Amongst the other Lahu tribes, traditional costume has been supplanted by the Thai shirt and sarong. Lahu men wear a plain black shirt and baggy black trousers.

Lahu villages are at high altitudes. The Red Lahu are the only tribe to build a central Animist temple, surrounded by banners and streamers of white and yellow flags. Houses are built on high stilts with walls of bamboo or wooden planks, thatched with grass. A ladder leads to an open central living area, with a store room to one side and living quarters to the other. There is one large bedroom, partitioned off as necessary according to family size. The main room has a central fireplace.

A high proportion, about one-third, of Lahu have been converted to Christianity, and many have abandoned their traditional way of life as a result. Animist Lahu believe in one spirit with overall control all the others, and they are rather predatory in search of a marriage partner, but divorce and adultery are common.

**THE YAO**

The Yao hail from southern China, and at one time had considerable power within the Chinese empire, to the extent that at one time a Yao princess was married to an emperor of China. They are the only hill tribe to use a written language, Chinese, and practice a written religion base on medieval Chinese Taoism, although in recent years there have been many converts to Christianity and Buddhism.
Their villages are widely scattered throughout the northeast, with concentrations around Nan, Phayao and Chiang Rai. They are a very peaceable and friendly people, who pride themselves on cleanliness and honour. The costume of the women is very distinctive, with a long black jacket with lapels of bright scarlet wool. Heavily embroidered loose trousers in intricate designs are worn, and a similarly embroidered black turban. The teeth are commonly capped with gold. The skull caps of babies are very beautiful, richly embroidered with red or pink pom-poms. On special occasions, women and children wear silver neck-rings, with silver chains extending down the back decorated with silver ornaments. Men wear a loose jacket which buttons diagonally across the front, with embroidered pockets and edgings.

Yao villages are at high altitude, built usually of wooden planks on a dirt road. There is a guest platform of bamboo in the communal living area, and two or more bedrooms. Girls of marriageable age have a private bedroom in which they can entertain suitors.

Some Yao grow opium, although in general the incidence is declining. The Yao are now integrating into Thai life. Their exquisite embroidery is a very saleable commodity, and their willingness to adopt new crops gives hope for their future prosperity within Thailand.

**THE LAWA**

The history of the Lawa people is long and poorly understood. It is certain that they have inhabited Thailand here 800 years ago. They believe that they migrated from Cambodia, but some archaeologists think their origins lie in Micronesia, perhaps 2,000 years ago.

With such a long history of cohabiting with the Thais (the legendary king Mengrai who unified Northern Thailand was probably half Lawa), there has been large scale integration, so that most Lawa villages are indistinguishable from Thai settlements. However, in an area of about 500 square kilometres between Hot, Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son, they still live a largely traditional life, although even here the majority have adopted Buddhism and Thai-style houses.

Unmarried Lawa girls wear loose white blouses edged with pink. Around the neck distinctive strings of orange and yellow beads are worn. The tight skirt is in parallel bands of blue, black, yellow and pink. On marriage, these brightly coloured clothes are replaced with a long fawn dress, but the strings of beads are still worn. The hair is tied in a turban, and it is usual for women to smoke tobacco from a wooden pipe. Most Lawa speak Thai, but the Lawa language, related to that of the Wa Tribe of Burma, is still spoken in many villages.
LIFE IN THE MOUNTAINS

COSTUMES AND HANDICRAFTS

The most obvious and remarkable characteristics of the hill tribes are their colourful, exquisitely crafted costumes and the beauty of their adornments. Their skills can also be seen in their tools, basketry, weapons and musical instruments.

Each ethnic group has a unique range of styles and colours particular to it. Great time, pride and imagination are exercised in the production of clothes and jewellery. They are an expression of status, pride and art. Many women still wear traditional costume, but the men and children are adopting western shorts, jeans and T-shirts for everyday wear.

Most articles are produced within each family. Women spin cloth and make their clothes, whilst men make tools and weapons. Specialist blacksmiths and silversmiths have high status within the community, and may attract business from other villages many kilometres away.

Jewellery is commonly made from silver, most melted down from Indian and Burmese silver coins. Brass, copper and aluminium are also used. The jewellery amassed by a family are the outward display of their wealth, worn by the women at the New Year festival.

Clothing and handicrafts were not until the last ten years regarded as marketable products. With encouragement from the Thai government and the King’s Royal Project, co-operatives have been set up to manufacture and market their traditional goods, which are now big business in the markets of Thailand, and can be purchased at countless outlets throughout the world.
RELIGION
The “hilltribes” are predominantly animists, although amongst the Karen, Yao and Akha there are Christian and Buddhist minorities. Animists believe that conscious spirits with powers over humans exist throughout their surroundings. The “hilltribes” believe in these spirits most profoundly - they are as real as the physical, visible world. There are spirits in such things as rocks, trees and rivers, which have power to bring great good or harm. Ancestor spirits are cared for by the family or village. For this reason, every village will have a shaman, who can communicate with the spirits and ensure the correct actions at all times.

BIRTH AND MARRIAGE
Birth is the most dangerous time for all hill tribe people. Amongst women, complications in childbirth are the most common cause of death, and infant mortality is very high. The average number of births per couple is six, partly to offset infant mortality. Children are insurance for their parents against sickness and death, so it is vital to have enough to ensure that some survive to adulthood. Death rates have been falling over the last thirty years, with improvements in health care and education, so that the natural growth rate of hill tribe populations, even excluding immigration, is very rapid. Because of the dangers, pregnancy and childbirth are surrounded by taboo and ritual. The women give birth, usually assisted by a female relative or specialized local midwife. The baby is not considered a ‘human’ being for several days after its birth - the several souls within the body take this time to enter the new-born. The mother’s behaviour before and during childbirth is carefully watched. To die giving birth is a “bad death”, leading to a high risk of the dead mothers spirit returning to haunt the village.

Courtship varies form tribe to tribe. Most are promiscuous before marriage, except the Karen. Once a girl has become pregnant, it becomes necessary for her to find a husband.
There is a high degree of etiquette in the finding of a mate. Lineages must be consulted and good omens looked for before permission can be given. Monogamy is usual, although amongst the Hmong a second wife is acceptable. The marriage ceremony is always a great celebration, very expensive for the bride or groom’s family. It is usual for the bride and groom to come from different village, so the celebration of one marriage frequently spawns others!

**“HILLTRIBE” VISIT ETIQUETTE**

Track of the Tiger Co. Ltd., has been conducting ‘soft adventure tours’ in the north of Thailand since 1986. Most of our clients are people of middle-age (30-65) who often express concern about the effect of their visits to the hilltribes. In fact, many foreigners refuse to visit the hilltribes for fear that their visit will have an adverse effect on the lifestyles of the hilltribe peoples.

To overcome this fear we advocate the following:

Prior to visiting a hilltribe village, visitors should ask their guide to assist them in purchasing a number of inexpensive blankets. These blankets only cost between Baht 50-65 each. The winters in the North are sometimes quite harsh and the hilltribe people can never have enough blankets.

On arriving in a hilltribe village, ask your tour guide to take you first to the village headman’s house to be introduced. Have the tour guide introduce you to the headman as an “Ambassador of Goodwill” from your country, and present your gift of blankets to be given out at his discretion to those in need of them.

Having done this, request his permission to look around the village, and his permission to take photographs should you wish to do so. Even with the permission of the headman, when wanting to photograph a villager, ask first - sign language is enough. If they do not wish to be photographed, heed their wish, for many villagers believe that in photographing them you will capture their soul.

**Can we prove otherwise?**

This simple approach will endear you to the headman. It will also reinforce his status in the eyes of the villagers, and probably prompt him to stop outright begging by the village children. (If they do beg, just smile but do not give them anything.)

In adopting this method over the past decade, we have found it works well and allows both the hilltribes people and visitor alike to retain their dignity.

Do not worry about the possibility that the headman may keep the blankets for himself. The villagers have seen you present your gift, and it is they who elect the headman.
OPIUM

Obtained from the sap of the opium poppy, Papaver Somniferum, opium has long been an important cash crop of the Hmong, Yao, Lahu, Lisu and Akha hill tribes. The situation has been changing over the past decade, however, through the efforts of the Royal project and various NGOs (non-governmental organizations). Further, many of the younger generation realize what an economic drain addiction can be, and avoid it.

The drug has a fascination for many tourists. The common name for the region north of Chiang Mai, the “Golden Triangle”, conjures up an exotic vision of drug warlords, mule trains, field of pretty flowers and the intrigue of the opium den. In fact, the crop is a threat to all who are involved in its production or use. Amongst the Hmong, up to 30% of the male population are addicted. The typical addict will smoke twenty or thirty pipes a day. They cannot work efficiently or at all, life expectancy is reduced and families are pushed into malnutrition and misery. The production of opium has been illegal since 1959, but despite the attempts of the government to eliminate it, the drug is still produced in large amounts. However, in Thailand the size of the crop has been reduced by 80% in the last ten years, but Thailand is still an important conduit for opium from Burma and Laos, where production is still rising.

About 50% of opium is converted to the more dangerous, but even more profitable heroin. Six kilogrammes of opium can be converted into about one kilogramme of heroin. Small scale heroin “factories” are located in remote spots on or near the Burmese border, patrolled by armed guards and frequently mined. The advantages to the hill tribes of opium farming are that it has high value for small volume, it can be stored without spoilage, it is an easy crop to grow on land that would otherwise be infertile, the dealers come direct to the growers and there is no competition with lowland farmers.
Poppies and maize are usually grown in the same field. Maize is planted in April and harvested in August. In September and October the poppy seeds are sown amongst the maize stalks which protect the young seedling. The crop must be weeded several times before harvesting in February or March. A few days after the petals have fallen, the outside of the flower pod is scored with a three-bladed knife. The white sticky sap exudes from the pod and dries on its surface overnight. It oxidises to a brown gum which is scraped off with a broad bladed knife, formed into balls and wrapped in banana or mulberry leaves and buried until collection. Each pod can be tapped several times. The seeds form the most productive flowers are kept for planting next season.

Opium is the source of a wide variety of drugs given the general name of opiates. The most important include morphine, heroine and codeine. They are all powerful analgesics, but opium, heroin and morphine are all highly-addictive and tolerance quickly develops so that larger and larger doses are needed. Depression of the higher centres of the brain causes feelings of euphoria in which fear, apprehension and inhibition are reduced, the ego is expanded and there is a general sense of well-being.

The user may experience a state in between sleep and wakefulness, with vivid, usually pleasant dreams. Other less enjoyable effects may include nausea, sweating, drowsiness, mental and physical impairment, poor concentration, apathy, reduced hunger and lowered sex drive. Some individuals feel depressed, anxious and fearful. The opiates also suppress the activity of the muscles of the intestine, leading to constipation or reduced diarrhoea. With high doses the respiratory centre of the brain is incapacitated, potentially causing respiratory failure and death.

The narcotic and sleep-producing properties of opium have been known for thousands of years. The Sumerians in 500 BC were the first to record its use. The Greeks used it extensively. Hippocrates noted its effects and the Roman physician Galen was enthusiastic about its therapeutic properties. The Arabs introduced it to Persia, China and India in the early middle ages. In Europe, Paracelsus discovered laudenum, tincture of opium. Later paragoric, camphor combined with laudenum, was used to control diarrhoea. For 200 years opium was regarded as a universal panacea. Until this century it was the only effective painkiller known to western medicine, when its addictive dangers were not appreciated.
In the latter part of the 18th century, Britain discovered a lucrative trade in opium. It was grown in British India and exported to China in exchange for gold and silver. This was used to buy tea and silks for import into Europe. The trade was controlled by the British East India Company but they did not carry the drug themselves as it was illegal in China. They used instead “country traders”, licensed by the company to bring goods from India to China. These traders sold opium to smugglers along the coast and passed the proceeds on to the East India company. Opium addiction in China became so high that in the mid 19th century the Chinese government engaged in two “opium wars” with Britain to restrict its import. In 1860, China agreed to import the drug and impose a high tax on it. By 1917, voluntary restrictions on its production finally ended the trade on a large scale.

In the 19th century, its use in Europe was widespread. Patent medicines contained high doses, to encourage clients to come back for more. Many prominent persons were unwittingly addicted, particularly writers and artists, who believed it increased their creative powers. In this century, vigorous attempts to restrict its use, and particularly that of its more dangerous relative heroin, have been largely unsuccessful. Heroin addiction in Asia and the West is a chronic problem, particularly since its preferred method of intake by injection has helped to spread AIDS throughout the world. The opium and heroin trade in Thailand is largely controlled by two “armies”. The Shan State army was founded to establish an independent Shan state in Burma. The funds for its weapons and manpower are provided by the production of heroin from opium. The Shan army has attempted to extend its influence inside Thailand, meeting opposition from the former Kuomingtong (KMT) or nationalist Chinese.

Historically, the KMT controlled most heroin production in Thailand. They were the legitimate government in China before the communist revolution of 1949. Following this defeat, they fled in two directions. One group settled in Formosa, founding the state of Taiwan, still controlled by the KMT today. The other group, led by General Lee, settled in northern Thailand and Burma. Their original intention was to retake China from Mao in a two-pronged attack. This never took place, but the remnants of the army in Thailand developed the heroin trade. They were useful to the Thai government, and to the west, who were pleased to have a fiercely anti-communist and well-armed group patrolling the northern borders. They turned a blind eye to the heroin trade, which consequently expanded.

Many hill tribe boys were recruited into the Kuomingtong and Shan armies, from which there was no escape. The armies were powerful enough to dictate prices and production levels to the villages, who either supported or were rightly afraid of them. In the last ten years, the danger of communist incursion into Thailand has largely disappeared, so the government has been able to concentrate
on the elimination of the crop, which has met with considerable success. At the same time, it has been necessary to replace opium with other cash crops. Soft fruits, tea, coffee and temperate vegetables have been introduced into hill tribe farming patterns, and now contribute greatly to the economies of many villages.

**THAI FESTIVALS IN CHIANG MAI**

The Chiang Mai Valley is blessed with festivals almost the whole year round. Old festivals are based on the lunar calendar and their origin either lies in Buddhist traditions or in Brahmanic and Tai beliefs associated with the rice growing cycle. Newer cultural festivals have evolved from a blend of local traditions and commercial interests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Festivals</th>
<th>locations</th>
<th>Origin of festival</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 3rd weekend</td>
<td>Umbrella Festival</td>
<td>Bo Sang village</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 4 days on weekend</td>
<td>Wood Carving Fair</td>
<td>Ban Tawai, Hang Dong</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nearest the end of the month</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1st weekend</td>
<td>Flower Festival</td>
<td>(See main festivals)</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February Full moon of</td>
<td>Makha Bucha</td>
<td></td>
<td>A famous sermon given by Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd lunar month</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13th - 15th</td>
<td>Songkran</td>
<td>All over Thailand, especially the north</td>
<td>Ancient Tai-Indic Traditional New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(See main festivals)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May Full moon of 6th month</td>
<td>Visakha Bucha</td>
<td>At temples all over Thailand</td>
<td>Buddhist Celebrates birth, enlightenment &amp; death of Buddha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May - June From 12th day</td>
<td>Inthakhin Wat Chedi Luang:</td>
<td>Especially in the evening when crowds</td>
<td>Ancient Tai-Indic: Pay respects to the city pillar, bring rain &amp; encourage prosperity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>day of waning moon</td>
<td></td>
<td>make offerings at the city pillar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of sixth lunar month for 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>days</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May - June 6th - 7th</td>
<td>Setup Jata Muang</td>
<td>Offering made to guarding spirits at the</td>
<td>Ancient Tai-Indic: Prolong life of city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lunar months</td>
<td></td>
<td>cardinal points of City (gates, city</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pillar, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Track of the Tiger T.R.D.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Festival Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>4th day of waxing moon of 7th lunar month</td>
<td>Setup Jata Muang</td>
<td>Ancient Tai-Indic: Prolong life of city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>14th day of waxing moon of 7th lunar month</td>
<td>Lieng Pu Sae-Ya Sae</td>
<td>Animist: Propitiate guardian spirits Pu Sae &amp; Ya sae who live on Doi Suthep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Full moon and 1st day of waning moon of 8th lunar month</td>
<td>Asalaha Bucha- Wan Khao Pansa</td>
<td>Buddhist: Marks the first sermon given by the Buddha &amp; the beginning of the rains retreat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>From full moon of 10th lunar month till end of September</td>
<td>Salakphet</td>
<td>Buddhist: Lay merit-making. Lams are put in baskets and given to monks by lottery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>1st day of waning moon of 11th lunar month</td>
<td>Ok Pansa</td>
<td>Buddhist: End of rains retreat. Buddhist: Celebrates return of Buddha to earth from heaven where he had been teaching his mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Till the full moon of the 12th lunar month</td>
<td>Kathin Kathin</td>
<td>Buddhist: Lay merit making. Offerings of robes and alms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>For three days over the full moon of the 12th lunar month</td>
<td>Loi Krathong (Yi Peng)</td>
<td>Ancient Tai-Indic: Give thanks for water and to stop the rains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Weekend nearest 5th</td>
<td>Rose Festival</td>
<td>Cultural: Beautiful flower displays honour H.M. King’s birthday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>1st - 8th in Lamphun Dec 30th - Jan 8th in Chiang Mai</td>
<td>Winter Fairs</td>
<td>Cultural: A noisy mix of fun fair, freak shows and commercial promotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December In the middle of the month</td>
<td>Food Festival</td>
<td>Suan Buak Hat / Thapae Gate</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 25th - 31st</td>
<td>Christmas &amp; New Year</td>
<td>Traditional (imported)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Songkran
BUDDHIST FESTIVALS

Buddhist Holy Days (Wan Phra) fall on the eighth day of the rising and falling moons and on the first day of the new moon. Thai calendars usually have the phases of the moon and the lunar month shown under the dates. The Thai years are calculated from the death of the Buddha, which is held to be 543 years before the birth of Christ. Thus 1996 is B.E. (Buddhist Era) 2539.

If you visit a temple on a holy day, you may see older men and women in white sitting around the viharn. On holy days devout lay Buddhists traditionally stay in the temple for twenty four hours. On the three main annual Buddhist festivals (Makha Bucha (puja), Visakha Bucha and Asalaha Bucha) that celebrate events in the life of the Buddha, people go to the temples early in the evening for the wien tien ceremony. After chanting, a sermon and some meditation, they walk mindfully three times clockwise around the chedi or viharn holding flowers, a lit candle and burning incense. They then place them nearby as an offering. The ceremony is very colourful and is an excellent time to go to any of the major temples.

Festival Parades
The people of the north excel at putting on parades which are the main feature of many festivals and can last for several hours. Leading institutions sponsor a section of the procession. School marching bands (an art form for which several local schools have gained prizes in international competitions) and bands playing gongs, drums and cymbals lead men and women in traditional costumes. The highlight of each section is a gorgeously decorated float with beautiful maidens. Prizes are offered for the best entries in the parade and much effort goes into them. Good parades to see are at the Bo Sang umbrella festival, the flower festival, Songkran and at Loi Krathong.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MAIN THAI FESTIVALS

1. The Flower Festival
Flowers in Chiang Mai are at their best before the end of the cool season when this festival is held. This falls on the first weekend of February. The centre of the festival is the parade held in the morning of Saturday. Floats decorated with flowers illustrate the theme chosen for the year. The beauty queens surrounded by flowers make a magical sight. The flower beds of the public gardens are bathed in colour and special displays are maintained till the end of Sunday. Previously the parade was held on the outer moat road from Katam Corner to Sri Phum Corner. Recently this has changed to a route north from the city along Chotana Road to the Lanna Rama IX Gardens.
2. Songkran (Mid -April)
The festival marks the traditional Thai New Year, which until 1940 used to be when the Siamese New Year began. The festival is the most important and is traditionally held when the sun moves out of Pisces. In Chiang Mai, the main events take place over three days (the dates vary for other northern provinces). By custom the first day falls on April 13th - the last day of the old year. Firecrackers are let off at dawn and people spring clean their homes.

In the afternoon, a parade of Buddha images from Chiang Mai temples goes from the railway station to Wat Pra Singh. Northern people toss lustral water (water scented with perfume and flowers) to bathe the images as they pass along the streets. The Phra Singh image leads the procession to Wat Phra Singh where it is set in front of the temple for citizens to bathe throughout the rest of the festival. Ceremonies are not held on the second day which separates the new year from the old. In the afternoon sand is placed in the temple compound as a symbolic return of the sand carried out on the soles of shoes and feet of the people.

The sand is made into small stupas for the next day. The new year begins on the third day. The early morning is a particularly good time to visit the temples to watch people in traditional costume bringing offerings. Ceremonies are held in the viharn. Outside, the people place flags in the sand chedi as well as symbolic sticks of support under bo trees to bring good fortune in the new year. Later in the day juniors pay respect to senior people and family members in a ceremony known as tam hua. In the afternoon the main government organization hold a procession from Yupharat School to honour the governor at his residence by the Nawarat Bridge.

**Water Throwing at Songkran**
If you suffered from a repressed childhood, then Songkran is good therapy. The entire youth of the nation arm themselves with buckets, squirt guns and anything else that can project water, and drench all but monks, the aged and mothers carrying very young children. Around the moats of the old city, the action is intense and the ice factories do such good business that you can get a chill despite the heat!

Young ladies should be prepared for sweet words to their ears while water is poured on their necks and shoulders by ardent young men. Wear clothes that you can be wet and happy in. Foreigners are always welcome target so protect cameras, wallets, etc. in plastic bags.

In the city water throwing begins as early as nine in the morning and goes on till sundown. It continues for at least four days and longer in the countryside. Keep doors locked and windows closed if you don’t want a high spirited reveller to empty a bucket or squirt gun into your vehicle. Drive slowly and beware of water hitting you at high velocity, especially if on a motorcycle.
3. Loi Krathong
Loi Krathong, which is also known as Yi Peng in the north, is the most colourful festival of the year. It takes place over the three days of the full moon of the twelfth lunar month, which usually falls in November. The festival may have evolved from Brahmanic rites to honour the dead as well as local rites to bring end to the rains.

Though legends suggest it was established by the time of King Tilokarat in the late 15th century, the origins of this festival prior to the last century are uncertain. Now, people generally believe that by releasing floats and balloons they get rid of bad luck and give thanks to the water and heavenly elements. Older folks may say that it is to show gratitude to the Goddess of the River - Mae Klong Kha - for use of her water.

For the three nights of the festival people release small floats (krathongs) with offerings that include incense, flowers, candles and money into the rivers and lakes. The River Ping becomes a stream of lights floating gently with the current. Small hot air balloons rise like lanterns high into the sky, complementing the floats drifting on the waters. Fireworks are let off everywhere, particularly on the banks of the River Ping and there is a parade each night in Chiang Mai.
The festival begins the day before the full moon. People decorate the entrances to their houses with coconut branches, banana trees, sugar-cane, lanterns and coloured paper. As dusk falls, people light earthen lamps placed along the walls of their property and the fireworks start. The lantern parade takes place on Thapae Road.

On the morning of the day of the full moon, people present offerings at the temples before releasing large hot air balloons from temple compounds. A competition for best balloon takes place in front of the city hall on Wang Sing Kham Road. Boat races are held on the river. At night the small krathong parade goes east along Thapae Road and ends at the City Hall.

The final round of the Nang Noppamas beauty contest is also held (usually at Thapae Gate) on this night. According to legend, Lady Noppamas was a beautiful daughter of a Brahmin priest in the court of Sukhothai. The young lady impressed the king very much when she made floats of lotus flowers for the kind to float down the river. Popular traditional holds at least from that time.

The culmination of festival is the giant krathong parade held on the third night. Miss Noppamas is paraded through the streets in a very colourful procession from Ratchadamneon Road to the City Hall. One or two floats are put onto rafts and sent - Nang Noppamas, lights and all down the river to the Nawarat Bridge.

NOTES ON DECORATIONS USED AT MANY RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS
Tung are a northern style of pennant hung from bamboo poles. They are used as offerings to Buddha images and the deceased as well as for decorating and blessing ceremonies. The common significance of tung is to avert ill and secure good fortune.

Their overall shape and the material from which they are made vary according to purpose. Tung may be made of a succession of web-like forms made of threads woven round cross-shaped frames, or from single long pieces of cloth.

Bamboo strips woven horizontally represent steps guiding the deceased to heaven. The longer the tung are, the more beneficial they are thought to be.

Talaeo are much less common. Made from plaited strips of bamboo from five or seven points, they serve as a charm against evil spirits.

They are placed near entrances to houses or villages to prevent entry by the spirits of the dead. Similar plaited shapes may be seen in rice fields protecting offerings to Mae Phosop, the goddess of rice, during the growing season.
HANDICRAFTS OF CHIANG MAI

The folk skills used to produce the necessities of daily life have combined with the high arts of decoration used in temples and court regalia to from the basis of Chiang Mai’s famous handicrafts industry. This applies whether it is an elegant celadon vase, a length of home spun hemp cloth, or a carved wooden elephant. Local artifacts make decorative souvenirs of the folk art of the region.

For more information on shopping, don’t forget to pick up your copy of “Chiang Mai’s shopping secrets”, published by track of the tiger. To arrange a shopping tour, contact track of the tiger at info@track-of-the-tiger.com. We will take you where you want to go!

Places to go Looking and Shopping

All handicrafts are available in the Night Bazaar area where the range of outlets - from humble street stalls to posh air-conditioned boutiques should please anyone. Several more shops open in the evening may be found on the western end of town nearby Loi Khroh Road.

In the daytime, silver and woodcarving shops are open on Wualai Road, and several shops selling arts and handicrafts may be found at the northern end of Nimmanhemin Road near the Amari Rincome Hotel. The Sankampaeng Road is known as the “handicraft highway”, but the emporiums which handle bus tours have gone far from the cottage industry origins of each craft.

For a historical look at handicrafts, go to the Chiang Mai National Museum (09.00 - 16.00, Closed Mondays, Tuesdays & National Holidays) for the best collection of artefacts. If you have a trade interest and want to see samples, much useful information can come from the government run Northern Craft Centre: 158 Thung Hotel Rd. 08.30 - 12.00, 13.00 - 16.30.
Using bamboo and other materials which are easily worked and readily available, people throughout Thailand have for centuries been making all manner of household objects such as baskets, hats and traps. In rural societies both men and women may still be seen splitting bamboo into thin pliable strips that can be woven into intricate patterns. In the north the most common woven objects are steamers and containers for sticky rice, mats and traps for catching fish in the paddy. However, the skill demonstrated in older pieces is hard to match these days, and youngsters are seldom interested in the traditional skills.

Where to see basketry.
Different villages tend to specialize in a certain type of woven product such as mats or containers but there is no special place to see the weaving. Around K.M. 13 on H108 (The Chiang Mai - Hot Road), a number of shops sell woven bamboo products. Some may also be found in the main Waiorot Market and the Night Bazaar.

Thawan Somthan
78 Mu 4, Tambol Pa Pong,
Saraphi, Chiang Mai.

Guided groups occasionally visit Thawan who leads a group of about 50 weavers dispersed around Pa Pong. Finding the workshop is difficult without a Thai speaker.
ANTIQUES

There are many “antiques” shops, but few genuine antiques as most have been sold long ago. Though the years of trade has led to the world wide distribution of much of the cultural heritage of the region, it has also encouraged high quality reproduction as well as the adaptation of traditional designs into modern pieces.

As a result visitors can return home with magnificent works of art for a fraction of the price of a genuine antique. Real antiques, such as are available, are likely to be of Burmese or Lao origin.

CERAMICS

The finest pottery of the region is known as celadon, which has a distinctive glaze made with wood ash. The technique of producing these wares involves applying the glaze before a second high temperature firing (1,260 C) in a reduced atmosphere of carbon dioxide). It was known to have been developed in China at least 2,000 years ago.

Traditionally the glaze is designed to “run” (flow down the pot as the glaze becomes glassy) as well as “craze” and take on a crackled appearance. Though a light green colour is considered ideal, old celadons could also be yellow and brown and the glaze matt and opaque if underfired. The main kilns in Lan Na were at Kalong (near Wiang Papao), Phan (between Chiang Rai & Phayao) and Sankampaeng. Just when and how the considerable skills required to make this pottery came to Lan Na is uncertain.

It is generally accepted that production near Chiang Mai at Samkampaeng began early in the 14th century and like other kilns was helped by Chinese potters who had moved south away from the Mongols.

However there is also the possibility that the necessary skills came from a hitherto undiscovered kiln site and could be Thai in origin. These kilns may have produced fine wares, perhaps with help from earlier migrations of Chinese potters, long before the establishments of the Sankampaeng kilns at the beginning of the 14th century.
The local industry thrived until the fall of Lan Na to the Burmese. By the mid-17th century war and the competition from cheaper blue and white wares from China had put out the fires in La Na kilns. Production began again at the beginning of the 20th century, bringing Lan Na pottery to a new age.

Where to see ceramics.
Traditional earthenware manufacture may be seen at Ban Muang King as well as Ban Kuan. Several places on the Sankampaeng Road produce and sell celadon.

HAND-WOVEN FABRICS

In the past, weaving was a most important skill for a Thai woman. Plain designs were for daily use, while those woven for rituals or ceremonies were elaborate. In the north, cotton was woven by the Tai Yunan and Tai Leu and silk was woven by the Lao. Thus silk usually had to be imported some distance and only high ranking families could afford it. Nowadays silk production is well established in the valley.

Women demonstrated their weaving skills on the tube skirt, known as pha sin. In the north the main parts of everyday pha sin are patterned with horizontal stripes and have separate waistbands and hem pieces sown on.

Ritual pha sin have much more detailed decoration and vary according to group. Geography and ethnic origin determined the style because the women weavers stayed close to their place of birth.
Young women produced the most complex pieces to show their skills to potential husbands.
In the Chiang Mai valley, the favoured colours are red, green and yellow, with red and black being used in the waistband and hem pieces. The decoration is out in the hem piece in a style of weaving known as tin chok, which creates strong diamond shaped patterns.

Where to see hand - woven fabrics
The best places to see traditional weaving are in the cotton weaving villages south of Chom Thong and near Mae Chaem. The silk emporiums on Sankampaeng Road have demonstrations showing how silk fibre is produced and woven.
HILL TRIBE ARTEFACTS

The hill tribes are famous for their bright costumes and jewellery, but other artifacts such as pipes, knives, basketry and musical instruments also make desirable souvenirs. Nowadays much of the hill tribe production is aimed at the tourist market. The unique designs have made their silver jewellery amongst the most desirable of hill tribe artefacts. Traditionally, the hill tribes have valued silver as a trusted measure of wealth and the amount worn at ceremonies would show the status of the family.

Wearing large amounts of silver jewellery is still the custom at important rituals and festivals. Silver ornamentation could also have a spiritual value to protect against evil spirits. The largest pieces of jewellery are the neck rings, silver buckles and heavy bracelets while the most decorative are the chains with silver pendants.

The silver originally came from coins which were either melted down or used directly as decoration in women’s clothing. Each group had their own designs which came from individual silversmiths who would only make a few similar pieces. Most of the old pieces have been sold long ago and the formerly important village silversmiths have all but vanished. Modern hill tribe jewellery, much of which is produced by lowland silversmiths is based on a mix of traditional designs.

Where to see hill tribe products

One of the best places to look for hill tribe products for sale is at the western end of the basement floor of the Night Bazaar building on Chang Klan Road.
LACQUERWARE

Lacquerware was originally used to provide a silky weather-proof finish that would preserve the life of an artefact. As lacquer provided a base for gilding and glass of pearl inlay, it was widely used for decoration in temples.

Its most common use was to illumine wood panels on doors and windows and especially cabinets that were used to keep palm leaf manuscripts. The lacquer came from a tree (Melanorrhea usitata Anacardiaceae) found in Northern Thailand and Burma.

The main design was in black and gold, a style known as lai rot nam. The designs themselves were two-dimensional (no perspective was used) and was a fine balance of gold and black. This was achieved with numerous flower designs round the main motifs.

The technique used to do this has been applied to modern production. A pattern in a yellow water soluble gum is painted on the piece and covered with a thin layer of lacquer. Gold foil is put onto to the sticky lacquer. When the piece is washed, the yellow paint and foil above it dissolve to reveal the black of the pattern underneath.

Lacquer was also used to seal baskets and Chiang Mai used to be the centre of a style of khoen ware that was red and black. This was used on household objects but the style went out of fashion and is no longer widely produced. Modern designs using coloured lacquer on lines etched into a black base are Burmese in style.

Where to see lacquerware

Lacquerware production as a cottage industry is very dispersed; most visible production is at the handicraft emporiums. Real lacquer from the tree is also increasingly scarce and some modern work may use petroleum base mixes.

SILVERWARE

In the North, silverware goes back at least to the time of King Mengrai, who imported artisans from Burma to Chiang Saen. Period silverware has been found in burial mounds. Despite this long tradition, antique Chiang Mai silver is no older than 100 years. The modern silver industry has Burmese origins that began with the resettlement of people from the Shan States by Chao Kawila.
King Chulalongkorn also patronised the arts and settled Burmese craftsmen in Chiang Mai in the Wualai area, which has remained the centre of traditional silver working ever since. Bowls used for ceremonial purposes are produced by hammering intricate patterns into silver sheeting placed over a wide tub of pitch. Local demand for silver belts as well as exports for the tourist market has given new life to the industry. Wealthy businesses have revived the production of large silver bowls weighing several kilos as prestige items.

**Where to see silverware**
The home of silvermaking is still Wualai Road, where silver shops line both sides of the street.

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**WOODCARVING**

This art form in Thailand originated from the temples where religious objects such as Buddha images and pulpits were finely carved. Royal regalia for the court and household objects used by the nobility were also decorated with carving. In temple building, the doors, shutters, gables and triangular brackets supporting the overhanging roofs were often intricately carved with animal and plant motifs. Some of the best examples of carvings in Chiang Mai are at Wat Duang Di, Wat Saen Fang and Wat Inthrawat (Wat Ton Khwen).

Nowadays, craftsmen specialize in just one type of carving used in the decoration of a viharn. The modern woodcarving industry itself is a development of only the last few decades. Traditionally only a few artefacts were commissioned and the wooden elephant was the most commonly carved object. The popularity of temple carvings imported from Burma as souvenirs encouraged dealers to get local craftsmen to reproduce them. The reproduction processes, which include aging methods such as burning and soaking in urine, have become so good that even experts have difficulty deciding whether an object is genuinely old.

The scarcity of teak has forced modern carvers to use other woods like that of the rain tree. These woods carve well and are inexpensive. Staining to hide the light colours of the woods has become more common. The carving itself is usually done in the rough in outlying villages near Mae Tha, before the pieces are sent for detailed work in the woodcarving centre of Ban Tawai.

**Where to see woodcarving**
The best place to see woodcarving is at Ban Tawai where carvers finish pieces in many of the hundreds of small and large shops selling carved wood products.
UMBRELLAS & SAA PAPER

These have traditionally been produced in the area around Ban Bo Sang. The tourism industry has made the once small craft thrive. Frames for umbrellas are produced in stages, and it is common to see men or women underneath houses working on a batch of umbrellas at one stage of the production process. Different households may specialise in one stage of making the umbrellas.

Saa paper production has been through a similar transformation driven by increasing local and tourist demand for decorative paper. The paper is produced by drying the woody stems of the saa plant (a kind of mulberry). Then they are soaked and pulverized into a mush in a mill. Colour is added and the mix is placed in tubs where it is suspended in water. By drawing a fine mesh grill through the tub, sediment accumulates on the grill in thin sheets. In drying the sediment coagulates to form the sheets of paper. These are then sold, or fashioned into souvenirs such as cards and notebooks.

Where to see umbrella and saa paper making

The villages around Bo Sang village are the home of both traditional saa paper making and umbrella making.
TAILORING

Again, given the devaluation of the Thai Baht against the world currencies, you are able to take advantage of the bonus and fit yourself out with a new wardrobe (suits/shirts/ties etc.) at ridiculously low prices. It is perhaps worth bringing along either an article to be copied, or a picture (from a magazine or catalogue) of exactly what you want.

If you advise us in advance, we can pre-arrange a fitting for the day of your arrival in the north and have an English speaking translator accompany you to the tailor.

Note: Translators are charged at US$15 per hour or part thereof (leaving your hotel to returning to your hotel).

SHOE & BOOTMAKING

Years ago it was considered essential to wear ‘hand-made’ shoes to ensure absolute foot comfort. Handmade shoes are still available in Thailand and again at extremely reasonable prices. Both tailor and shoemaker can normally have your suits or shoes ready within 4-5 days so that you may have your purchase delivered to you before you leave Thailand.